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.44 Western MAGAZINE

AUG.

BULLETS BUY A BOOM-TOWN!

by ROBERT TRIMNELL

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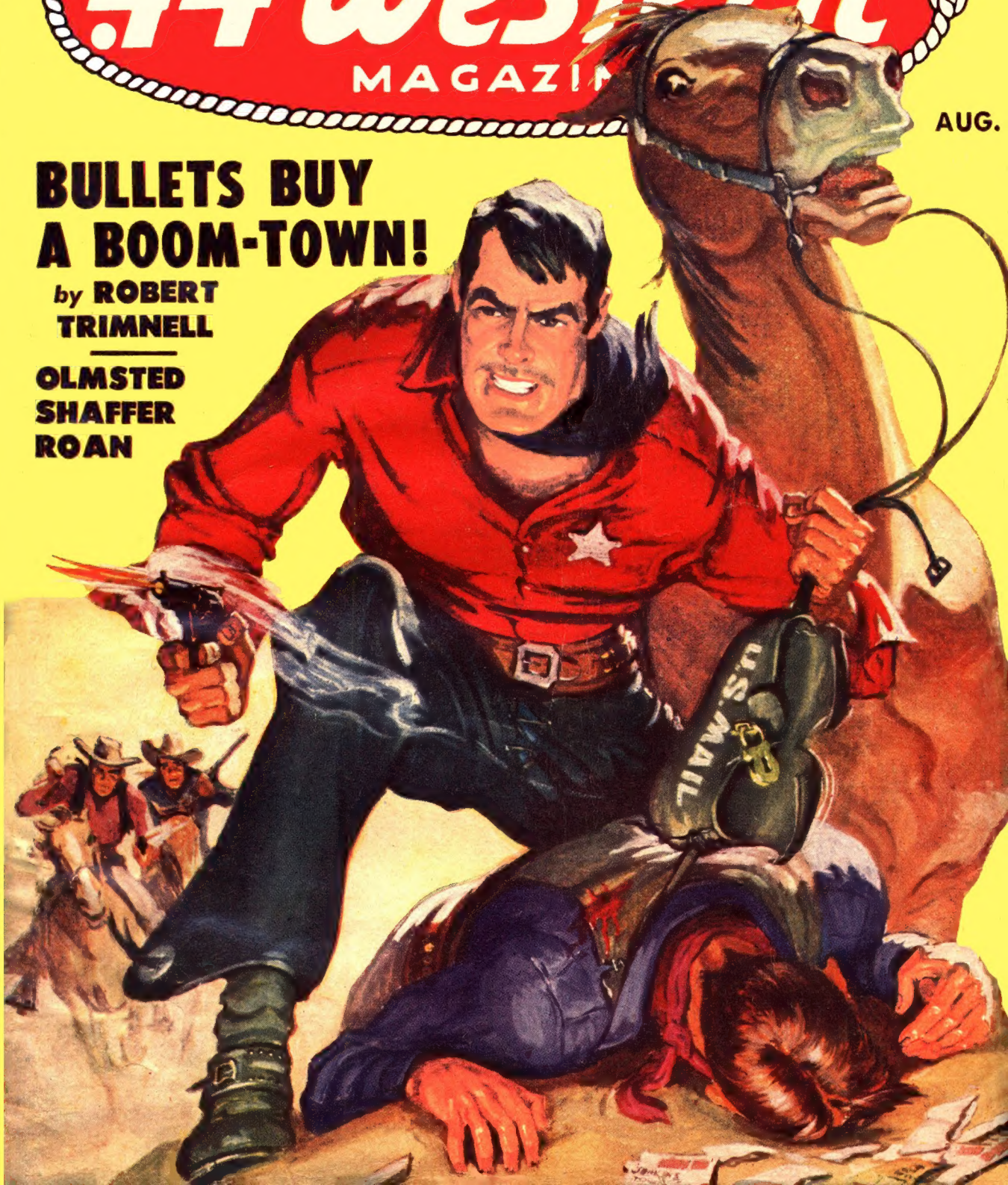

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.44 Western MAGAZINE

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

Vol. 26 — Contents for August, 1950 — No. 1

BULLETS BUY A BOOM-TOWN! . . . . . **Robert L. Trimnell** **10**
A single word could save Pickaxe town from perdition—word from a dead man beyond a gunsmoke grave! *A Novel*

B'AR MEAT FOR HOG JAW . . . . . **Tom Roan** **33**
Hog Jaw's citizens feared nothing that walked, crawled or flew—until the flood washed up those furred envoys from Hell! *A Short Story*

SEVEN-FOOT—PRINCE OF PIZEN! . . . . . **Bill Colson** **43**
The toughest brawler in the Territory wondered if he had guts enough for that Oro Fino brand of war. . . . *A Short Story*

NIGHT OF THE LONG KNIVES . . . . . **Ray Gaulden** **52**
Mountain men came to Bear River Post to trade their pelts—and found they must barter with their lives. . . . *A Novelette*

HOLE-CARD FOR THE DAMNED . . . . . **James Shaffer** **68**
Innocent Link Bolton would hang at dawn unless he pulled a killing for which he'd already been falsely condemned. . . . *A Short Story*

FIREWATER FEUD . . . . . **Frank P. Castle** **77**
Marsh was a strange trader: He'd rather risk a bullet in his guts than firewater in an Injun's. . . . *A Short Story*

FIRST TO DRAW—LAST TO DIE! . . . . . **Harry F. Olmsted** **86**
The man who rode under the "Curse of Candor" wondered if he could disprove that age-old law that a man who lives by the gun will die by the gun. . . . *A Novelette*

STEEL TRAIL DEADLINE . . . . . **Harrison Colt** **104**
To reach the Kansas-Colorado line those weary railroad heroes must lay track even beyond Boothill. . . . *A Novel*

HE'S AN EATIN', FIGHTIN' MAN! . . . . . **Alkali Ike** **6**

RECORD ROUND-UP . . . . . **Bob Poole** **8**

CUSTER FORGOT—AND DIED! . . . . . **Victor Lygdman, Jr.** **51**

FRONTIER MONSTER . . . . . **L. C. Davis** **126**

HE DIED LAUGHING! . . . . . **Dave Sands** **128**

NEXT ISSUE OUT AUGUST 18th!

Any resemblance between any character appearing in fictional matter, and any person, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

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He's an Eatin', Fightin' Man!

By Alkali Ike

THE old trapper of yesteryear was what one might call an "eatin' man."

Livin' off the land as he was, he learned to really appreciate the food he got—which wasn't too much sometimes. He learned to eat when the eatin' was good, against the time he might not have any food, or the day when he might loose his scalp.

In the mountains most of the time, he naturally looked for the food that was easiest to get, which was the buffalo. Of course, some of the Indians didn't take too kindly to this, and there was a mite of scalp-raisin' goin' on from time to time. But the mountain man was more'n a match for the redman in woodlore, so he took what he wanted.

If the boys shot a buffalo after a few lean days, it was an occasion for real feastin'. They'd all gather around to help with the skinnin' and carvin' and while this was goin' on, they'd eat a bit of liver or some other choice bit.

First, they turned the buff'lo on his belly, split his skin down the backbone, and peeled it down the sides where it laid to receive the meat.

Cuttin' through the ribs with an axe, they saved out the liver, heart, tenderloins, and small intestines.

Not havin' no bakery right near at hand, the mountain man sort of invented a bread. This was the fat along the backbone of the buff'lo which he dipped in grease and hung up to dry. This would keep for a month of Sundays and was handy to eat when they was on the trail.

The small intestines of the buffalo was considered a great delicacy in the hills. The trappers, mixin' with a lot of Canada French from time to time, took to callin' this special dish "boudins." In French lingo it means "black puddin'," but to the trapper it meant just plain good eatin'.

(Please turn to page 129)

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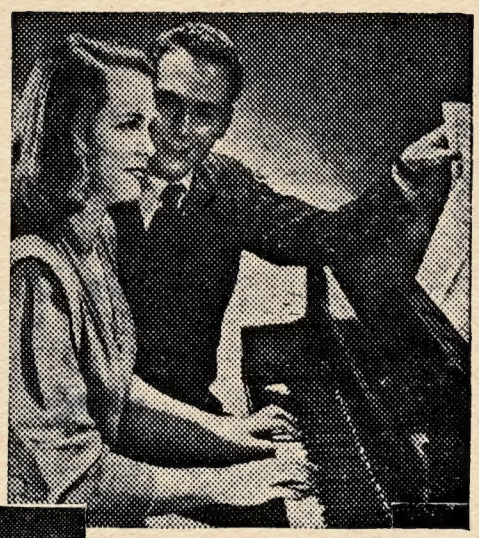

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* * *

You know, I like to keep my listeners up to date on modern inventions, so now that I have readers I would like to do the same with them. Did you know that within the year dentists are going to fill teeth with the use of air pressure. Instead of using a drill—I hate that word—they'll use air pressure and it won't hurt a bit. I don't believe it won't hurt, but at least you'll hear a different noise while you're having your teeth filled. It's the noise that always hurt me anyway. Of course this new gadget won't interest my dentist back home. He ain't got no time for filling teeth. He can pull a tooth and put in a new one cheaper than he can drill. As a matter of fact, the only drilling equip-

(Please turn to page 124)

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By

Robert L. Trimnell

He brought up the Colt

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The man's gun exploded orange flame

Pickaxe town and everything that moved in it, was ready to blow to perdition, ignited by phony mine stocks and tinhorn, derringer-toting promoters, unless Luke Morley, a man who'd returned from Boothill—received a dead man's order from beyond a gunsmoke grave!

CHAPTER ONE

Dead Man's Heritage

LUKE MORLEY crouched over his fire that night wishing those weren't the last two strips of bacon he was throwing in the pan, and glad it was the last of the sourdough that went in with them, because he'd done something wrong in making that sourdough, and the last two weeks it had tasted awful sour. It meant he'd have to hunt the trail to that cowtown on Bull River, for supplies about a half ounce of gold flake would buy.

He needed company, too. For that reason he'd built a good-sized fire on the chance that some passing cowhand or prospector would see it and join in his

scanty meal. Luke Morley was lonely.

Indeed, the fire had only been going half an hour when he heard the beat of hoofs across rock. He stood up and stretched his lank figure, brushed the long blond hair out of his eyes and raked raw-boned fingers through his heavy beard, as though to prepare himself for company. It didn't do much good, merely left him looking like a tough luck prospector between twenty and thirty years old toughened to whang leather and steel by the biting winds and blazing sun, the sparseness of food and water of the high country. The heavy wool shirt and levis he wore could be said to hide his body; beyond that it could be called shabby or plumb worn out, as one chose.

He grinned in expectation of his guest. He was a man who could take company or leave it. But right now he had to tell somebody about the big old grizzly bear he'd seen tear a panther to pieces on the roof of the Dawson Hole, and about the trail he'd blazed through the Deerheads, where nobody with any sense would go in the first place.

So he grinned as the hoofs drummed up to the fire. A gray mustang burst through the brush, came to a snorting halt. Luke Morley stopped grinning. Staring into his face was the mouth of a Colt .45.

Luke had never had a tied-down tongue, but it took him a moment to rip it loose from the roof of his mouth. "Don't shoot!" he finally gasped. "I only got a rifle and that's in my pack, and there's not over ten dollars worth of gold washin's you can rob me of!"

The face behind the gun relaxed. It was an aged, weatherbeaten face, but pale, washed clean of color. Its owner blinked red-rimmed eyes, then ran a gnarled hand shakily across his forehead.

Suddenly, the gun dropped from his hand and clattered on a rock. He fell forward, clung to the saddle-horn.

"Help me—a bit," he groaned.

Luke hurried over and grabbed the man's stocky, strongly-built body, took the weight as the oldster rolled out of the saddle. On his feet, he was too weak to stand up. Luke helped him over to a big rock, sat him down, propped him against it.

"Sorry I poked that there smokepole into yore face," the man said.

Luke shrugged. He took hold of the mustang and began to unsaddle it. There was blood on the saddle-horn.

"Bottle whiskey inter the saddlebags," the man gasped.

Luke needed no urging about that. He got the saddle off and turned the mustang loose. He did all that because it had to be done; but not very cheerfully. Not when the oldster had just scared a year's growth out of him. He got the bottle out, took a snort and handed the bottle to the injured man. His eyebrows rose when he tasted it. No two-day whiskey, that. Scotch. He glanced at the oldster, saw he was wearing a fine black coat and California pants. And the old fellow's speech told Luke he wasn't born with the kind of money that bought Scotch whiskey.

"Can I help your hurts?" Luke asked.

"Let 'em be," the oldster growled, then added angrily, "You can't help 'em."

Luke glanced at the frying pan. Black smoke was curling up out of it. He dumped the burnt bacon and sourdough into the fire. He shrugged. Tonight he'd have whiskey for supper. Scotch whiskey, at that.

"Bud," the oldster said, "what's yore name?"

LUKE GLANCED at the man, at his gaunt, wracked features, and figured he should be doing more important things than asking names at this stage. There was not much time left for him.

"Yore name?" the oldster said, a bit impatiently.

"Luke Morley."

The man passed a shaking hand over his forehead. "I don't reckon you ever been rich."

"Rich?" Luke smiled. "Just so happens I was that way, once. I spent a year chousin' mavericks out of the brasada country down Texas way. Drove a thousand north to Dodge. I busted the faro bank in every saloon in Dodge. Then I did what I'd wanted ever since I was a kid pickin' cotton along the levee. I bought me a sidewheel steamer."

The oldster glanced at Luke's tattered clothes and smiled weakly. "Reckon I'm lookin' for somebody else. You had your fill of rich."

Luke shook his head. "Not on your life. First run out, a big stump was where it shouldn't of been, and it tore her keel off. She sank like a stone. Somebody gave me five hundred dollars for salvage rights and I lost it at faro. I had my sidewheeler. I want a town."

"A town?" the old man coughed and it shook him like a mouse in a cat's mouth. Luke went over and helped the oldster into a reclining position. He felt better then. "A town? You want a town—real bad?"

"I reckon," Luke said. "A town all my own. People, stores, a mansion, everything."

"I can give it to you. A hull damn blasted town!"

Luke frowned and reached into his pocket, pulled out makings and rolled a quirly. Now, that was mighty big talk, giving towns away. But the incongruity of his companion's appearance, the weatherbeaten face and rough speech, the expensive clothes and Scotch whiskey, the injury that he hadn't let Luke look at—it was all far from ordinary. It was a little fantastic.

"I'd do a lot to get this town," Luke said, taking a twig from the fire and lighting his cigarette.

"Then get that oilskin-covered package out of the saddlebag," the man told him.

Luke found a package about a half-foot square and an inch thick. He gave it to the oldster. With shaking hands the man tore it open. "Help me set up a little," he said. Luke supported him, and the man got a pencil out of his pocket. He licked the lead, and paused as though remembering something.

"To get this town, you got to kill a feller."

Luke frowned. "You can hire a gun cheaper'n that."

The oldster seemed not to hear him. His red-rimmed, pain-wracked eyes were far away. "His name is Angus. I promise on my heart you'd be savin' the law the price of a hemp necktie. Only the law needs evidence. You don't." He coughed again, turned over and spat blood. Luke saw blood seeping through the front of his coat. A lung had been punctured, he figured. At last the oldster was back at his former position. His face was gouged by deep black lines now, and the spark was out of his eyes. "You'll be rich as any man can be if you play this hand through," he whispered. "Will you do it?"

Luke found himself nodding. His visions of power and wealth were vague and surrounded by clouds; nevertheless, he would take the oldster's offer—only one man to die, and he deserved it "I'm your man," he said.

On some paper in the pocket, the oldster scribbled a half dozen words. "Yessir, you'll be rich as any man can be. This packet—it's yours." He lay back then, smiling a bit. "Reckon I'll have to rest up." He closed his eyes and was asleep.

Luke tore the old fellow's clothes loose around the chest. He shook his head. He took the packet, glanced at its contents, and spent a half hour smoking and watching the old man sleep.

Not long before midnight, George John Harrick died in his sleep, victim of a bullet hole in his right lung.

IT WAS late afternoon when Luke approached the mining town of Pickaxe. Named, he had heard, after the finding of the original strike through the accidental dropping of a miner's pick a couple of years ago. The miner's name was famous. He was the best known of all the high-country prospectors: George John Harrick.

Luke was riding Harrick's black mustang, carrying the oldster's Colt at his waist, and leading his own burro behind, loaded with his wash pans, mercury, pick and other equipment. In his pocket was a most interesting little package of papers, and a note saying they once belonged to George John Harrick, who signed them over to Luke Morley. Each of those papers was a hundred shares of stock in the Pickaxe Mine, and there were fifty of the papers. With Pickaxe worth ten dollars a share, as everybody knew, and constantly rising, Luke had been paid at least fifty thousand dollars to kill a man named Angus.

There had been other duties. He had buried Harrick, for the oldster had written on the paper that he wanted to lie out there in the rough country he had spent his life prospecting. He had said as decent a prayer over the grave as he could figure out, and then carved a wooden marker. He felt sorry for the oldster. One thing, he thought Harrick would have been a decent type to know. Also, he had died and left threads hanging. He had told Luke nothing more than that a man named Angus had to die. And that somehow Luke would win a town. There had been that sly smile on the dying man's face when he spoke of those things. What did that mean?

Luke had come to Pickaxe to find out.

He saw the sprawling, quickly-thrown-together town below him, hunkered into a steep-shouldered, flat-bottomed red canyon, with smoke belching from three smelter stacks. People in the streets were like swarming black ants at this distance.

Which should make him like an ant to them, Luke figured. And which made it a good time to get rid of Harrick's horse. It would be well known in Pickaxe. He dismounted, stroked the black's nose and slapped it on the rump with his battered gray Stetson. For a moment he watched it wander off in search of grass. Then he led the burro down toward town.

He took it all in; the heat that increased as he got into the sheltered valley, the black cinder from the smelters that had been used to fill potholes in the muddy road. The ore wagons winding down from the mine shafts and the milling, restless scatterings of men through the streets.

They paid little enough attention to him. From a saloon porch, a loafer called out lazily, "You strike it rich out there, pardner?"

"Rich as a man could hope for," Luke replied with a grin. He remembered that those were the words Harrick had used. He would be "rich as a man could hope for." Which was a lot, because Luke was a man who dreamed big dreams.

Thinking to look the town over before he chose a cheap hotel and a livery stable for his burro, he went to the main crossroads, two streets of honest western width. On one corner a sign named the two streets. One was Harrick Avenue, the other, Main. As he stood there in the middle of the crossing, buggies and wagons passed. A handsomely dressed man on a chestnut gelding pranced by, and a crowd of Irish miners, laughing and joking as they tramped through the mud toward the mine.

It took him by surprise. There, on the corner, not a hundred feet away. A huge gold-lettered sign: ANGUS HOTEL.

As though drawn by a magnate, Luke

pulled his burro over to the hitch rail, tied it, and mounted the three steps to the broad porch facing the intersection chopping off one of the corners. It was built of unpainted wood, but as he knew mine towns, Luke figured it could be all plush and gilt inside.

The lobby wasn't quite that fine, but the floor was dark and well-polished, reflecting the sparkle from a big spangled-glass chandelier that hung over the middle of the room.

There was a stairway leading up, a desk-clerk's booth, and two doors leading off the lobby. One said BAR, the other TEA ROOM.

Surprisingly, Luke started for the tea room. The vision of a hot cup of rich red tea was at the moment stronger than any prospector's dream of foaming beer. Tea was not the drink for Luke's kind of man, but he had run a placer one summer with an Englishman, and from him had learned to love the pale, punchless beverage.

As soon as he opened the door he knew he had come to the wrong place. Here was the plush and gilt, obscure lights and stiff chairs and delicate little tables. And Luke Morley in tattered denims. The waiter, dressed in a faultless tuxedo, gave him a single contemptuous, dismissing glance.

Luke didn't leave. For one thing, he hated waiters. He ran a hand through his ragged beard, glared back at the man, and sat down close to the door.

The waiter stopped before him, nose well-elevated "Your pardon, sir," he said. "Coats are required in the tea room."

Luke grinned. "My valet is pressing mine at the moment." His grin faded. "Get me a pot of tea!"

The waiter's eyes flicked. "I shall be obliged to call the manager, sir."

Luke put both big hands on the tiny tea table in front of him. "You can call the manager if you want this table bent over your head. A ruckus would be worse advertisement for the tea room than a kind of dirty thirsty fellow settin' here. Tea dammit!"

He got his tea, and the waiter stood in a corner, arms folded, watching him drink it. Which Luke did slowly, so as to increase the fellow's annoyance. He didn't enjoy it as much as he had with the Englishman. The cup was too small and delicate, where they used to gulp it down from an old tomato can while they rolled brown paper cigarettes.

But it tasted good. Luke glanced over the tearoom. It contained a half-dozen people, all well dressed, talking quietly, sipping their tea and glaring angrily at Luke. He scowled back at them, even though he enjoyed the attention. He felt like a bull in a china shop, and it was fun. Just to see what would happen, he picked up his dirty, battered hat and put it on. All conversation died. He grinned and nodded to each of them.

SUDDENLY he lost the stage. They were no longer interested in him. He heard the door open, saw their eyes leave him. A quick light tread of boots passed him. His eyes bulged.

It was a girl, dressed in black from head to foot. Riding boots, riding skirt, jacket, all black, but less so than the hair that cascaded down over her shoulders. She turned to sit down and Luke spilled his tea. Her face was a warmly-tinted ivory and her eyes lustrous black coals.

"Law-zee!" Luke said.

She signaled to the waiter with a brusque movement of her black-gloved hand. Then she sat back, stiffly, and stared into space.

Just like a sleek black filly, Luke thought. He grinned and rubbed his hands together. Nobody could ever say Luke Morley dreamed small. He'd wanted a sidewheeler that time, and now a town. When it came to women, well, the sleeker

they were, the better he liked to tangle with 'em.

He saw her remove her gloves as the waiter came bustling up with a pot of tea. She handled the pot and cup skillfully, with long, tapering white fingers. Luke began to grin. By gosh, when he had his town, wouldn't she be the one to be his hostess for visiting governors and cattle kings and the like? She'd make 'em all feel like they'd been raised in a barn.

Somehow, Luke never thought of the fact that he was unshaven, dirty, and wearing his hat. He never worried about such trifles.

His thoughts were interrupted by the entrance of a slim man with pale face and hands. A gambler, Luke knew. You couldn't miss his type. And Luke was just as sure that the gambler had been at the bar. He walked well enough, but a little too gaily for a tea drinker. He stopped in front of the girl, leaned over her table.

"Hello, Hara," Luke heard him say. The man's lips were not working as well as his feet. Luke's eyes narrowed. He had just built himself an air castle, and this black filly was firmly staked out as his territory.

The girl didn't even look at the gambler. Her black, level stare passed a foot to his left. She spoke loudly enough for only the gambler to hear. But Luke saw her crimson lips mouth the words, "Go away!"

The gambler laughed. "Hara, you come into the saloon. Have a drink with me." He leaned closer to her, and Luke saw her recoil an inch.

This time Luke could hear her say "Go away!" Her voice was husky, and the two words carried the message well. Luke had heard men use that tone of voice, and they always had one hand on a gunhandle when they used it. He felt himself half-rising. Trouble was about to flare over there, and the black filly was involved. *His* black filly! Her eyes caught those of the gambler then, and they flashed like black diamonds. "My father will have you horsewhipped!" she hissed.

The gambler threw his head back, roared with laughter. "Your father won't—"

Luke could take no more. He was on his feet with a lunge and the tea table was in the way. It went crashing across the room. And as he moved, he saw the girl's white hand dip below the table. It came up and a tiny revolver glinted in her fist. The gambler saw it, too, and sobered.

She glanced at Luke, rushing up. For a moment the pistol waved toward him. He stopped.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion?" she said, her voice flat and cold, her eyes two black coals gleaming angrily at him.

Luke removed his hat. "I was about to dirty my hands on this gambler here, ma'am," he said.

"Go away," she said hoarsely. "I was about to shoot him." She turned to the gambler, who was glancing from one of them to the other, a sneer twisting his mouth.

"You wouldn't shoot," he snarled. "Even you couldn't get away with murder."

"No?" she said. Coolly, she raised the barrel, brought a slender white thumb up to the hammer, jerked it back, and fired.

Flame burst from her fist and the blast rocked every teacup in the room. Smoke mushroomed out, and before it was gone the gambler was upon her. He was strong for his slim figure. One hand crashed into her gun, and it went spinning into the china teapot, breaking it. The other hand he fisted and drove at her face. It crunched nastily into her strong ivory jaw.

Luke let out a growl. That was his black filly the gambler was beating up!

He reached a raw-boned hand over and caught the gambler's collar, yanking him

off the cringing girl. He turned the man around, let him go. The white face was dead toward him, the pale narrow eyes slitted. The man's hand was diving for his coat pocket. Luke laughed. He brought a left up from underneath. With a snap it sent the gambler's jaw straight up, a round white target. Luke took one step forward as his hairy, weather-hardened right fist came swinging wildly around. Like hitting a piece of kindling wood with an axe, he thought, as he sighted on the white blob of a chin. His knuckles landed and he threw all his weight behind them.

The crunch rang through the room. The gambler left his feet, landed on his head and skidded across the floor. He lay like an unpressed suit.

Luke turned to the girl. "Your shot missed him, ma'am. Bad shootin'."

She ignored that. She had recovered her poise now, was standing regarding him coldly. Only a slight blue bruise on the side of her jaw marked the encounter.

"You clumsy backwoodsman!" she snapped. "Alone, I would have killed him!"

She turned. With a swish of her riding skirt, she was gone.

* * *

Luke looked around him. The waiter was staring peevishly at him, and a couple of men had come in and hauled the unconscious gambler out. The other patrons of the tea room, mostly elderly women, were hurrying out.

"Well, I be damn'!" Luke said, looking at the mess of broken tables, tea cups, and spilled tea around him. He picked up his hat, now half soaked with tea. "That's what you get for bein' chivalrous!" He said that to nobody in general, and nobody heard him except the men who were crowding at the door to see what had happened. One of them guffawed.

A bit confused by his predicament, Luke eased toward the door, out into the lobby. He wondered who was going to pay for the broken stuff. Not him.

He was almost out the front door when somebody tagged his arm. "Sir, sir!"

It was the waiter. He held up a new twenty-dollar goldpiece. "The lady said this is for you, sir. To pay for your trouble." He said that as though part of it should compensate *him* for *his* trouble.

Luke looked at the coin as though it were crawling with worms. "So, the black filly rates me at twenty dollars, eh?" He grinned at the little waiter. "Sonny, you take some of that and buy a bunch of the longest-stemmed roses in town for the lady. Have 'em sent to her, see?"

The little waiter nodded. He began to grin as he thought what should be done with the rest of the twenty dollars. "Yes sir, yes sir!" he chattered.

"And you take the rest and buy yourself some decent clothes, see?"

The waiter looked down over what he considered a respectable tuxedo. He looked at the tattered clothes on the man in front of him. "Yes, sir, I see," he said, but Luke knew he didn't see at all. He sighed.

"One more thing, Sonny. What's the name of the black filly?"

"Why, I thought you knew, sir! That's Miss Hara Harrick. Daughter of old George John Harrick."

Which made it Luke's turn to be surprised. He just let his mouth slide down to his shirt and stay there.

BY NIGHT Luke wished he hadn't been so free in tipping the little waiter. Prices were high in Pickaxe, and his blob of gold washings would buy little. The assay office gave him six dollars and thirty cents for them.

He'd figured on a trip to the barber's, and some new clothes. But after paying in advance for a closet of a hotel room, the burro's keep for a day, and a rousing

big dinner, he had only a handful of change. The best investment for that would be in beer.

He tried four saloons, had four beers, and got a firm grip on the temper of the town. It was one grand brawl. Each bar was lined four deep and you approached batwings carefully, for somebody was always strongarming his way through, sending the doors swinging wildly. The law, in the form of burly City Marshal Jake Kearne, played the game rough too. The marshal interrupted a knife fight between a pair of miners in typical fashion. One man he caught by his long hair and the seat of his pants and heaved him over the bar, where the bartender dispatched him with the bungstarter. The other attacked the marshal with his knife and got a boot in his belly. He was told to carry his unconscious antagonist to the Pickaxe jail, and lock the two of them in while the marshal had a drink at the bar. Luke had no doubt that the knifer did as he was told.

For all of Kearne's good work, Luke didn't figure Pickaxe for a tamed town. He resolved to stay out of the big saloons. After a lot of searching, he found one that caught his fancy. It was small, on a side street, and had no gambling establishment, just a few poker games in back. Only three men were at the bar. And Luke knew he had called it right when he saw the bartender.

"Cap Oaks!" he called. The bartender was a round, bald little man with a goodly paunch, and he all but vaulted over the bar when he saw Luke. They shook hands and spent five minutes recounting the days when Cap was pilot on Luke's sidewheel steamer.

"And what you doin' in Pickaxe, Cap?" Luke said.

Cap shrugged his meaty shoulders. "Silver crazy, like ever'body else. Bought some Pickaxe stock cheap, come up here to see how it was doin', sold a bit when it went up, and went in for bartendin'. The rest of the stocks will be worth five times what they are now, when they strike that new lode."

"New lode?" Luke said.

Cap nodded and rummaged under the bar until he found a bottle of fine old bourbon. He uncorked it and they sampled what he called his finest and 'onliest.'

"George John Harrick himself says it'll be the richest yet. His word's good enough for me," Cap said, banging a fist on the bar to emphasize it.

"Yass?" Luke said. "S'pose you just hike me up on the history of this Pickaxe Mine, Cap?"

The bartender cleared a space on the bar and framed it with his pudgy hands. "Well, George John first dropped his pick, up the mountain, six years ago, and accidental-like it gouged out a piece of silver float you could hammer out and use for coins. Well, that got folks right excited, and by the time George John took his first million out, enough of the boys had been droppin' picks around the mountain that three other companies had started up, but Pickaxe was right off and still is the biggest. Then all of a sudden the pocket is dry as a empty bottle." He took a snort of the bourbon to add color to his illustration. "But George John ain't one to quit. He said they was a dozen threads leadin' into the mountain, and he put his first million back into the mountain, followin' them. The stock held up good through that. Then he was down a bit, but he brought in a partner, Carl Angus, of course, and the talk now is she's about to be the richest yet."

"Oh?" Luke said. So, Angus was Harrick's partner! Angus, who was going to absorb a couple ounces of lead from George John's black-handled gun, in payment for the five thousand shares of Pickaxe stock.

"Um, Cap, you say they're goin' to strike a new lode?"

The bald little man nodded quickly.

"Umm." Luke sucked on his quirly, and his eyes got an absent look. "Cap, I've swung a few picks into the stuff myself. Maybe they got rock here that's like glass, and you can look through it and see silver. But seems to me, Cap, any man says he is goin' to strike a new lode come next week, he's either crazy or a liar."

"But George John hisself says—"

"Cap. Which is George John, crazy or a liar?"

Cap pounded his fist on the bar. "Neither! The finest old coot I ever see. He ain't neither one."

"No," Luke said. "But I'll tell you what he is. You lean close." Luke got close to the bartender's ear. "He's not a liar and he's not crazy. Cap, he's dead."

CHAPTER TWO

Jump-Off for Boothill's Trail

IT WAS Cap's turn to say "Oh-h!" and his mouth circled and he blew out air with a hiss. Stunned, but not too far gone to clamp a pudgy hand on the neck of the bottle and tilt a few ounces of bourbon down his throat. By his expression, Luke saw that the main support for the Pick-axe, for people's confidence in it, was George John Harrick. To him, they listened blindly, even when he said things that only a crazy man or a liar would say.

"Dead!" Cap gasped.

"Buried," Luke muttered.

Just then they were interrupted by a hissing voice from the batwings. "That's him!" someone croaked.

They both turned. Framed by the doorway were two men. One was the gambler Luke had laid out a couple hours before, now sporting a beautiful big black bruise on his chin. His companion was a red-shirted man with a jaw like a swollen horseshoe and shoulders so big they bent him over. Long arms hanging, he came pacing toward Luke like a gorilla, narrowing his pig-like eyes and breathing hard.

"How d'you know Ace Cassel?" Cap asked with a sound like an apple core was stuck in his throat. "Aces is the little one."

"Oh," Luke said. "We had a argument over a lady, Ace and me. Who's the gorilla?"

"Skinny Sheridan. Only he ain't skinny."

Luke could see that. Skinny was named by somebody with a rather feeble sense of humor. He had forty pounds over Luke, a large part of it in his neck and shoulders, all knotted up like mesquite roots by some work like swinging a pick.

"You with the dirty beard," Skinny growled, with a voice like a bear in pain. "You hurt my friend Ace this mornin'."

Luke sighed, spat on his hands and moved away from the bar so as to have room to work in. "I reckon I did. I didn't figure he was so delicate when I started. But he deserved it."

Skinny looked as though carrying the argument further by means of talk was not in his line. "I'm evenin' up for him," he rumbled.

Luke always liked to tackle big things. Maybe Skinny was too big, but there was no way out of it. "Start evenin'," he said.

The burly miner started a bull-like rush, arms hooked out, his head down and his neck bulging. Why, Luke thought as he dodged to one side, Skinny is the kind that wears a size eighteen collar and puts it on over his head!

Skinny showed he could dodge, too. He shot his rush off to the side and his skull rammed into Luke's middle. Luke felt his belly flatten and a cannonball head made his backbone twang like a plucked guitar string. All the air went out of his mouth in a teeth-rattling surge. His back hit something that seemed to be a table. He skidded over it and landed on a chair, which splintered to matchsticks. The wall stopped him with a jolt.

Luckily, Skinny had stumbled dur-

ing his charge. Growling, he got up. Luke skinned himself off the wall and wobbled to his feet. Between them was a table. Luke backed around it, waiting for his bones to stop feeling like smashed reeds. Skinny had his arms hooked out, trying to grab Luke and get him into a crushing grip. Luke feinted to the right and his opponent grabbed. To the left, and as Skinny lunged over that way, Luke leaped on top of the table.

The arms hooked in. Luke jumped, doubled his legs up and both his big-boned knees came down on Skinny's head. He groaned as they smashed in. He heard Skinny bellow but had no time to see what happened, for he went crashing off, landed on his back.

SKINNY was down. Luke pulled himself up painfully, unlimbered his good right arm. Skinny was on his feet now, dazed, but managed to lower his head for another charge. Luke started his fist way behind, wheeled, swinging it around like a sledgehammer. It whooped in under the lowered head. Skinny didn't see it until it was an inch from his face. He ducked. Instead of his mouth being smashed, he took Luke's rocky fist between his small eyes. He stopped, like a sledged bull. He wavered, quivering with the blow.

Luke was hurt too. He figured his hand was broken, so he used the other one, cutting the left up and chopping it off Skinny's chin. The burly miner grunted and his arms went slack. But he wouldn't fall, just stood there like a stump that had to be uprooted. His eyes went out of focus.

"He won't fall down," Luke panted.

"No!" said a shrill voice. Luke turned toward the door. It was Ace, his face twisting with fury. He had a short-barreled gun in his fist, and he was bent down over it. Luke took it all in as a flash. Ace—the single hanging lamp. Cap behind the bar. Cap had a knife in his fist. In that split second before Ace fired, Luke wondered about the knife. Then it added up. The overhead lamp was on pulleys for lowering and raising it, and Cap was cutting the rope.

He saw more than that. He saw a tall thin man in black beside Ace. A long lantern jaw, pale thin lips twisted in anger and eyes like yellow marbles glaring at Luke. It was Angus! He knew, but not by description. He felt it: that was Carl Angus! Then Ace's pistol flamed and everything disappeared. Luke was throwing himself to the floor even as the hanging lamp went crashing down. From behind was a scramble of heavy feet. Then the blackness came down.

Something heavy flopped down on him but he wriggled clear. Above were the stabbing flashes of gunfire, howled curses and scrambling feet. Luke crawled behind the bar. He ran his head into somebody else's. It was bald.

"Cap! Let's get the devil out of here!" he whispered.

"Grab my heel."

Luke did that, saw a patch of gray open up a foot from them. Cap crawled through it, and Luke held the barman's heel until he got to the hole. A bartender's escape hatch, it seemed to be, leading into an alley. He scrambled out and they both started running.

At the edge of town they stopped in a clump of rocks. Cap was panting. Luke crouched down and built a quirly. "Ace took it awful bad, me wipin' the tea room with him," Luke said. "I'd almost think he had some other reason for havin' Skinny try to even up, and then shootin' at me. Say! Cap, was that Carl Angus in the doorway?"

The fat bartender was still panting. He nodded. "Angus and Ace is good friends. Besides, Angus was starin' awful hard at that black-handled gun of George John's that you're wearin'."

"Oh," Luke said, adding it together

and getting a satisfactory answer. Very simple, it seemed now. War between George John Harrick and Angus. George John had lost and hired Luke to avenge him. But why were they fighting in the first place?

Luke told Cap all that had happened when he met George John. They tried to piece together what they knew about the situation. By midnight they were hopelessly entangled in missing pieces. Luke decided it was time for sleep.

"I reckon, Cap, I won't use that hotel room I paid for. I think the fresh air out here would be healthier, considerin' that Angus and his little playmates are in town."

So Luke spent another night under the stars. It was a hopeful night. Before going to sleep he built himself quite a sizeable marble palace up in the clouds, and the thing persisted in his dreams. Not the least important feature of the palace was a black filly striding through the marble halls with a rustle of silk.

THEY made breakfast in a clump of bushes behind a slag pile. Cap was the sort who could find iced drinks in the middle of the desert, and by the time they finished their bacon and eggs, Luke had a shave, a haircut with regular barber's shears, a pair of pants that were too tight, and a new red miner's shirt.

"You'd be plumb disguised," Cap said, "if it wasn't that the back of your neck and your lower face are white as a Christmas lily."

Luke looked at himself in the piece of mirror that had come with the rest of the stuff. He saw a big bony jaw he hadn't looked at in some time now, an ear that stuck out more than his lost shaggy hair had admitted.

"I got used to thinkin' there was a lot more prettiness under the fur," he said

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mournfully. "Reckon the black filly'll have to love me for my beautiful intelligent mind."

Cap swilled coffee down. "Most men she loves best when they're dead. You, anyway, she gave you twenty dollars. She at least thinks you'd make a servant for her."

"Reckon," Luke said. "She figures men are good to split kindlin' wood and haul out the ashes, that sort of thing. But is she in the habit of tryin' to shoot gamblers like Ace Cassel?"

Cap shook his head. "No, and that's what makes the picture wrong. She never had the chance, afore. A feller 'lowed as how he was goin' to have her, once, and she said she'd shoot him if he come near, but she never got the chance. Her daddy pistol-whipped him and some of George John's friends uprooted a hitch rail and rode him out of town." Cap mused over that, mopped his bald head with a handkerchief. "See, Luke, why that makes it not add up is that Ace is too smart to get fresh with her, except—unless he knows her daddy's dead."

They looked at each other. Luke said, "And Ace—friend of Carl Angus—" His friend nodded. There was no more need for talk. They both understood. Angus and Harrick might have been partners at one time, but friendships had ended in much sweeter ways than had theirs.

They were parting when they heard the whistle from the mine shaft, announcing the change of shifts. Cap went back to town. Luke hitched up his belt and started for the mine.

He followed the deep ruts worn by the ore wagons up the steep slope to the yawning mouth and shaft buildings of the Pickaxe. He grinned, thinking that it was a funny way for a near quarter owner of the great Pickaxe to approach; in pants too small, a red shirt, and on foot. It was an unusual thought for Luke. He had never been interested in clothes, and his air castles were always painted from the viewpoint of his own eyes. What he looked like amidst it all was a thing that he'd never bothered to figure out.

There was a little office in the slab building next to the mine's black mouth. He sauntered in, eased up to the counter. Behind it was a wrinkled little man in gold-rimmed spectacles.

"Hirin' office is in town, next to the brokerage," the little man said, giving Luke a cursory glance.

Luke lounged against the counter and began twisting a cigarette into shape. "I don't figure I need a job at this moment. Just thought I'd look around a bit."

The little man gave him a startled glance. "You better run along," he said.

Luke lit his cigarette. "Reckon I'd like to look into the mine."

The man sighed, wagged his hand out the window, where Luke could see a stream of miners coming off shift. A couple of men who had been lounging in the door of a facing building cut through the stream of miners and came up behind Luke. They were big men wearing bowler hats, with cigars sticking from their wide faces.

"He's nosey," said the little clerk.

One of the huskies said, "You want him, Joe? Or you want me to heave him?"

The other bit hard on his cigar. "I'll take him."

WHILE they argued as to who should dispose of the intruder, Luke backed against the wall and hauled out Harrick's black-handled Colt. He pointed it at the cigar-gnawing huskies.

"Reckon you better take me to see the boss-man. Looks like I'll need permission to visit the mine."

The two showed their empty palms and nodded. "We didn't know you was so determined," one said. His voice was that of an innocent guard ordered to keep trespassers out, but who wouldn't press

his duty to the point of danger. Which might be true, except that Luke saw a decidedly dirty look in his small eyes

"I'll follow you two," he said.

They growled and Luke saw that their plans had been otherwise. One opened a door and they both mounted a stairway. Luke sighted his gun at the wrinkled little man behind the counter. He ducked. Then Luke swung up the stairs after them.

He waited while they knocked on a door. After a moment it opened. They squeezed to the side of the narrow, turning stairway as Luke lumbered up, holstered his gun and entered the office.

Behind a wide, marble-topped desk was the black filly!

Hara Harrick didn't wear black velvet today. She had a red miner's shirt on, open low at the neck, and sturdy blue trousers. The red shirt, Luke thought, set off those black eyes and her wealth of black hair pretty nice. As he watched, her face went the color of the shirt.

"Get out of here!" she snarled with a flash of sharp white teeth, the corners of her mouth turned down. "I gave you twenty dollars for your supposed services yesterday. That's enough!" She jerked a thumb toward Luke, glanced at the two mine guards in the doorway.

Luke was partly overcome by the vicious beauty of the woman, but he'd reserved a working part of his mind for the two cigar-gnawers. He stepped back and his heel touched something before it reached the floor. That would be toes. He put all his weight on that heel and turned on it. There was a scream shrilling into his ears. The other guard was pulling a short billy club from his pocket. Luke kicked him in the shins, hard. Then he whirled, grabbed the other's coat lapels, swung him and smashed him into his partner. They stumbled on the stairs. He grabbed the door and slammed it shut. There was a swinging latch, and he locked it.

When he turned, he wasn't surprised to see Hara standing, her eyes flashing and her well-filled shirt front heaving. Even less surprised to see the little pearl-handled revolver in her fist.

"All right, all right," he sighed. "So you're going to shoot me."

"Yes," she said, earing back the gun-hammer.

"You and Angus run this show pretty high-handed," he said, his eyes narrowing. "You drove your dad off, by your crooked ways. And without him, people won't have the confidence in the mine they had before. You're cutting your own throats." Luke didn't know that for sure. He was guessing, but he saw he'd hit his target.

Her gun hand went limp. Uncertainly, she sat down. "Who are you?" she asked quietly.

HE GRINNED. "Luke Morley's my name, ma'am." He sauntered over to the desk and perched on the edge. He kept his right side away from her, so she wouldn't see the famous Harrick black-handled Colt. He didn't think she knew her father had been drygulched. He'd keep that back as a trump card.

"I don't see the roses around," he said, grinning. "The ones I sent you yesterday."

She ran a slender white hand over her jaw, pausing at the bruise Ace had smashed there. "I think I have underestimated you," she said, her black eyes narrowing, raking his ill-clad figure from head to foot, touching on the white patches on his face and neck where the beard had been. She wrinkled her nose with distaste at his unlovely get-up. True, she also wore a miner's shirt but it was cut to fit her form, and of the finest flannel.

She's confused, Luke thought. Now's the time to give her something to think about. "The Pickaxe is worked dry, right?" he said.

But she wasn't surprised, and he knew now that it was he who had underestimated her. She smiled.

"I don't push that easy, Mr. Morley." Then the smile was gone. "Get out of here. You've no right to come in asking things that aren't your concern, and—"

"No?" he said. "I got no right? Lady, I happen to be the most silent partner Pickaxe could want, only I'm through bein' silent, and I'm startin' to be a partner!" He reached into his shirt and pulled out the oilskin packet, opened it and flung his five thousand shares of stock on the desk.

"Where did you get that!" She rose to her feet, and the tiny pistol was in her hand again. She shot the other hand across the desk and gripped his wrist. "Where!"

He grinned, gave a quick twist that threw her hand off, but left four gashes on his wrist. The lady had long nails, he observed.

"It don't matter where I got 'em, Hara."

"From Carl Angus?" Her eyes were flickering over his face, anxiously, desperately trying to probe his thoughts.

"I told you that you got to count me in on this deal. Look, all that keeps these stocks up is the confidence investors have in your dad, and when he says there's the mother lode at the other end of this thread you're followin' through the rock, they believe him, and Pickaxe is worth ten dollars or more a share, right?"

"Exactly," she said, her eyes flickering over him suspiciously.

"And maybe now that you're nearin' the supposed mother lode, Carl Angus and Hara Harrick will unload their worthless stock, eh? And leave old daddy to crawl out from under, eh?"

Her lips stretched into a tight line. "They won't be worthless as long as my dad is alive, and as long as he tells people they're good."

Luke leaned close and threw his parting blow. "Hara, your father's dead." He swung to the side, showed her the black-handled gun. She cried hoarsely and her ivory-pink features went chalky. She stared, wild-eyed, at the stocks, at Luke, at the gun.

"Why—why!" she shrieked. In spite of having to throw a thing like that in her face, Luke smiled. He hadn't wanted to. He hated such cruelty. But he had to break her down, had to find out where she stood.

But she didn't break down. She raised the ivory-handled pistol to his chest and yanked back the hammer. Her eyes were mad now, her hair disheveled, and she croaked out a single curse as she yanked the trigger.

Luke batted at her hand, but he wasn't quick enough. The little gun exploded and blasted black smoke into his face. The slug caught him under the left arm, tore a hook of fiery agony through his flesh, wheeled him.

There was a crash at the door, then, and the door flew off its hinges, as though someone had been waiting for a signal, a couple of sledges raised. Luke was toward it, and he yanked the black-handled Colt. In the doorway was one of the bowler-hatted guards, and beside him a big, black-haired man with glittering yellow eyes. Angus! Angus had a gun in his lean fist, and Luke had no time to remember that Harrick had paid him to kill this man. He was too busy clawing for his gun.

It was no good. From behind, the whole world came around and smashed the back of his head. Hara had hit him. With a chair, he thought, as he went crashing across the floor toward the men in the doorway. They didn't fire, just stood grinning at him. Slowly the sight of the two men grinning wolfishly went out of focus. The room whirled once and disappeared.

THE growing chill and dampness half-revived him. He was being jolted fiercely, and each jolt split his head wide open. He tried to cover his head with his arms, but couldn't. They were tied. A horse snorted. A mine pony, that might be. The chill deepened, and that would have eased his head, but the jolting got worse. He gave up and fell back into the blackness.

Perhaps it was the hands searching him that pulled him out of the black sleep. He'd always had tight nerves when someone touched him without authority. He opened his eyes, slowly, for they were like lead shutters.

There was a light above him, a miner's lamp, and behind it the thin smile of Carl Angus. And kneeling over him, her face a dark shadow as the black hair fell around it like a black bird's wing, was Hara. Her lips he could see in relief, half-parted and moist.

"You tried to bust in at a bad time, Mister Morley," she said. Against the flickering yellow light of the miner's lamp he saw her lips curl. "We don't want interference right now. In a couple hours, three picked miners are going to come running out of the mine with chunks of the richest ore Pickaxe has ever seen. It'll be taken to town, and in a couple hours, your packet of shares will be worth a million dollars."

His lips were heavy, not working well. "You really found it?"

She laughed, a light mocking laugh.

Angus snickered. "Fool! Why do you think we're going to start blasting into that mother lode immediately? So the tunnel will collapse. It will give us a few days to unload our stock."

"Salted," Luke mumbled.

"And that tunnel is right next to this blind cut." As the girl said that she rose, stood staring down at him, hands on her swelling hips, her eyes black shadows. "Killer!" she rasped.

As the word sank in, he gasped. They turned and walked out. He heard a metal door clang. "No!" he yelled. "I didn't kill him!"

A mocking laugh was his reply.

* * *

It took him a half hour to regain his strength. He lay there on cold, wet rock in blackness that was like tar, cramped, his head hammering if he so much as turned over an idea. His hands hurt, tied behind him. Surprisingly, they were not tied tight. By moving them gingerly, he got a loop free. Likely it was one of the bowler-hatted guards who'd tied him. They could be depended on to muff a thing like that. Another loop came out and then the rope fell off. He held it in his hands. At least it was something to hold, for the rock chamber was empty of everything but cold and wet and blackness.

He walked its length, some thirty feet. It was jagged, hacked and dynamited rock as high as he could reach, except for a heavy iron-bound door at one end. He lit a match and searched the walls. All he could figure was they had chased a thread of silver float into it until the thread expired.

He built a cigarette, sat glumly in a corner, lighting it, smoking slowly. He pieced together the history of the last two years of the Pickaxe Mine. George John Harrick at the zenith of his power, with silver ore streaming down the mountainside in a never-ending stream. Until, suddenly, it ended. Throwing his money back in, tracing the elusive silver thread to—blank rock. Carl Angus entering the picture, throwing in his wealth too, but with a meaner purpose. If no silver were found, he would use the Harrick name to support the crumbling empire. To give it one last boost by finding the salted lode, blowing the shaft closed while he dumped his stock for a fortune.

But Hara? Where did she fit in? Part and parcel with Carl Angus, Luke thought. Afraid to lose her wealth and power. Chased her father away when he would no longer put up with their thieving scheme. And now she called Luke "killer." Did she mean that, or was she covering her own trail?

That was what bothered him. He still thought of the black filly as his. No matter how desirable, though, he wanted no father-murdering hellion to help rule his—his town.

He laughed at that. His town right now consisted of a black rock vault and the piece of rope in his hands.

SUDDENLY something caught his eye. A movement? No, you could see nothing in this black hole. Nothing but—light. It was above, a dim glow like the flare of a distant campfire at night. It was gone then, but a fainter glow took its place. He backed. Then he could see it. Ten feet up the wall, a small opening, with a flicker of light touching it from time to time.

Hurriedly, he searched his pockets. They had taken the black-handled gun. His pockets were empty. He had only the piece of rope. If there was a projecting ledge. . . .

He took the end of the rope in his hands, flipped it up. The rope caught. He hauled himself up on it, got an arm on the ledge, and the wound under his arm from Hara's little gun seemed to rip wide open. He gritted his teeth together, raised himself, panting, his bruised head pounding madly. Then his arm slipped on the wet rock. He smashed down to the rock floor.

Groaning, he tried again. There were plenty of projecting pieces of rock, he found. Too many, for they tore his flesh with every movement. He hauled himself up with the looped rope, then got a firm foothold. Again he looped the rope, flipped it up. At last it caught another projection. That time it held, and he dragged himself hand over hand, at last catching the opening. Scraping the flesh off his arms, he grunted, dragged himself to it, eased in sliding by the lubrication of his own blood. At last he was on a foot-wide ledge, his head and arms through the hole.

Twenty feet below, he saw moving lights. Miners' lamps, attached to their foreheads. That made him maybe twenty-five feet above the shaft floor. He felt moisture drip down from his forehead. It reached his lips, and it was hotter and saltier than sweat would allow. For a moment his mind went blank. Then, voices snapped him out of it.

"This is the facing where they found it." The voice was from the left. He heard the clang of chisels being hammered into rock. As his eyes became used to the light, he could see them working, smoldering yellow figures moving feverishly among the jerky lights.

"Twenty sticks is too much," somebody said. "Might cave the walls."

A heavy, hoarse voice rumbled in reply to that. "Not here. Too solid."

That was Skinny Sheridan! Luke gasped. The gorilla that had almost finished him last night was down there directing the giant powder crew. Perhaps they didn't know about this old shaft here, above their tunnel. No. They didn't know that twenty sticks would cave it in on top of the blast.

"I'd like to see those lumps assayed," one of them said. "Looked to me like somethin' to go crazy about."

There was more talk. They were working out of his sight now. Suddenly the lights were all turned in his direction, and heavy boots pounded toward the mouth of the shaft.

"The twelfth fuse is bad!" one of them yelled. "A sputterer!"

Luke knew what that meant. No chance to call out to them now, for they were

panicked, running. A wild fuse in the setting! They scrambled by. His breath *wooshed* out and the blood was pounding wildly through him. He squeezed his shoulders through the hole, face downwards. He slipped over the facing until his knees were through. He flipped himself over. He let his breath out in an agonized wheeze, knowing it was twenty feet to the rock floor—and as he flipped he knew he could be broken by the fall, to wait for a roaring death. . . .

His feet hit and he let himself go limp. Every bone seemed to splinter on rock. For a second he lay there, and then frantic necessity pricked his nerves to life. He raced into the explosion chamber. It was too late to fight through the dark to the exit, and besides, Skinny would be waiting there.

The facing was alive with twelve neat red-yellow sputtering fuses like blazing snakes, weaving. He saw the sputterer—a burst of flame. He caught it in his hand like a live coal, jerked, threw it on the floor of the cut. Then he was jerking madly, throwing fuse after fuse, many with the caps still attached. If one of those caps burst close to a stick of giant powder . . . if he didn't get them all in time. . . .

Then he was flattened against the facing as caps exploded behind him, driving copper splinters into his legs and back. At last it was all over. The darkness was complete.

He turned and stumbled toward the mouth of the shaft.

CHAPTER THREE

Satan's Stock Exchange

THEY wouldn't come back to find why the blast hadn't worked, for a long time. He threaded his way slowly through the maze of a tunnel until he heard their voices. There was a bit of light out there. He got behind a turn in the working and waited.

They were arguing about what had happened. One said 'water.' Another snorted that it was dry in the facing. "Water," the man said again. "Nothin' else it could be. Water drippin' in."

Apparently to prove it, he came clomping through the passage. He's got nerve. Luke thought, going in to an unexploded setting. The man would get paid for his nerve. Luke picked up a rock fragment. The passage became light. He shrank back into his corner, wondering if at this moment Carl Angus and Hara were selling stock; if the telegraph wires were buzzing with news of the new Pickaxe bonanza. Angus would have stock for sale in a dozen towns, likely enough.

He gritted his teeth as the lantern bobbed past. He aimed six inches behind it and smashed his rock down. Without a groan the miner flopped to the floor.

Luke waited the five minutes it would take for the man to report. He pulled the fellow up, held him back in the crevice, put his lamp out. Then he yelled to them, "Like I said, water dripped down and put 'em all out. Some damn' fool cut into a water layer. That poppin' noise was just rocks fallin' down, where the water loosed 'em. Come on in, we got work to do."

His voice, he knew, would arouse no suspicion. You could not identify a person's voice after it rattled through a tunnel like that.

They streamed past him, hurrying, carrying picks and chisels with which to reopen the facing. Driving them on was Skinny, his voice frantic. Luke grinned. Skinny knew this job had to be done in a hurry. When they were gone, Luke hurried out of the tunnel. He lit the lamp, carried it in his hand. He came to the tunnel mouth, and found he was in the main corridor, a place big enough to drive ore wagons through. He stopped.

It was silent, and he had no idea which way led to the mouth of the mine. And he had to get out. Footsteps came rattling down the main corridor. He put out his lamp. A light pierced the gloom. He stood in a corner, waiting. It was the girl, Hara. In her fist he saw the black-handled Colt, the lamp clamped to her head. She was panting, her breast heaving as she turned into the tunnel mouth.

Luke took one quiet step, clamped a hand on the Colt and wrenched it from her grasp. With his other hand he tore the lamp from her head, put it on his own. He let her see the gun leveled at her face.

"Start talkin', lady."

A scream died in her throat and she put her hand over her mouth.

"I was coming to help you!" she cried.

Luke laughed and grabbed her shirt front in his fist, forced her back against the rock, his eyes slitting as he forced the miner's lamp's yellow glare into her face.

"Lady," he said, "I was in a rock-lined tomb a while back, waitin' to be blowed to pieces. You helped put me there. That makes a man forget he's a gentleman, see?" He tightened his grip on her shirt and shoved her back harder against the rock facing.

"Please!" she cried. There was fear in her black eyes now. "I thought you killed my father. . . ." She blinked her eyes, trying to look beyond the blinding light.

Boots were pounding down the passage to the setting. Luke figured they'd found out what had happened in there. He yelled at them, "First man comes out of that shaft gets his head blowed off!"

THE footsteps stopped suddenly and the mine was so silent it made your ears hum. "Look," Luke said. "This mine is worked plumb dry, right?"

She nodded and shielded her eyes from the glare of the lamp. Luke gulped. For a moment he thought, Hell, she's just a kid that got in with bad comp'ny. Purty as all get out and got spirit enough for ten women. I shouldn't be so tough on her. But he thought of the dank cavern they'd locked him into, and he thought of George John Harrick coughing blood. He growled, "You and Angus rigged a fake bonanza. Your daddy didn't want none of it and he took off for parts unknown, only they wasn't unknown enough and somebody caught him. Answer yes or no."

"Yes," she said, sobbing.

He let her go. "Walk ahead of me. We're gettin' out of here." He turned her and she began walking. He shoved the gun in the middle of her back and grinned. It wasn't at all necessary. She was scared green. But she needed a lesson. "Move fast," he growled at her. "This gun has a way of blowin' its head off." She trotted then and he walked behind with long swinging strides. Just as they came into the flood of light at the mouth of the tunnel, he drew her to one side. He couldn't venture out until his eyes were used to that. The two bowler-hatted guards were probably there.

"Now. Where's my stock, lady?"

She lifted her ivory chin high and her eyes narrowed. "Why should I give it to you?"

He gave her just as hard a look in return. "Maybe to show that there's some Harrick blood in you along with all that hellion and rattlesnake mixture. Your daddy seemed like a right nice fellow, and if you got any of him in you, you'll give me the stocks."

Her chin still high, she reached down inside her shirt and pulled out the oilskin packet. "I hope you choke on it," she said.

He looked hard at her, but couldn't tell what that was in her eyes. Hate for him, and a softness, too. Maybe she did respect her father. That softness got under his skin after a moment, wishing it were for him, and he felt weak inside.

"Let's go," he said, trying to growl it, but instead his voice came out squeaky.

She walked ahead of him into the blazing sunlight between the mine buildings. The area was deserted except for the two bowler-hatted guards standing in a doorway, chewing their cigars.

"You go ahead," he whispered, and dropped back.

As he expected, the appearance of Hara Harrick canceled all other thoughts from the minds of the two guards. He didn't think there were many thoughts present to start with, but she had swerved better minds than theirs. Both grinned and each shot a hand to his hat brim to tip it.

Luke got a tight grip on the black gun handle and stepped into the open. "Be extra polite, boys. Tip your hats with both hands."

One caught on immediately. The other's face twisted, puzzled, and he had to look at the gun in Luke's fist to get the whole idea. When he did, he reached for his hat so suddenly that he bit the end off his cigar.

"Step out in the open, boys," Luke said. "I want to remove the hardware that's stretchin' your pockets out of shape." They obeyed hurriedly, and he emptied their pockets of billy clubs and belly guns, then growled into their ears, "Go tell City Marshal Jake Kearne that they's trouble at the Pickaxe, and to come a-runnin'. Maybe you better go get him a-runnin', because the trouble is bad." They started walking down the hill toward town. "Runnin'!" Luke yelled. He raised his gun and blasted it off over their heads. One lost his hat. Both were instantly gone from sight in a cloud of dust.

Luke turned to the girl. "I had hopes for you once, Hara. I figured to share my town with you. Yes, I'm goin' to own this town, as of today, and I had a place staked out for you."

Her black eyes were fixed on the ground. Her hands were deep, thrust shamefully into her pants pockets.

"It's a pity you're such a ornery, black—" And suddenly he quit explaining her bad points, for she was through listening to him. She took matters in her own hands, and in her own way she explained her side of the argument. She flung both arms around his neck and mashed her full red lips against his. The soft, rounded body warm against him, Luke forgot all the things she had done to him. After a moment he broke away and stood facing her. Her face was red and her breast heaving, but she stared belligerently at him, her lower lip and chin protruding angrily.

Her voice trembling, she said, "We Harricks—we don't take—pushing around. See?"

Then while Luke was trying to see what she meant, she had turned, and all he saw was her straight red-shirted back and the

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black hair that billowed down over it, marching proudly, arrogantly toward her office.

"Why, you black filly!" Luke said. He said it without thinking, for his mind was whirling too rapidly to think. And suddenly he had no time for thoughts of her, for there was a rattle of boots coming out of the mouth of the mine.

That would be Skinny and the miners. It was time to leave, he thought, as he raced down the ore-wagon road and cut off into the brush.

IT WAS an hour later when he came into Cap Oaks' saloon. The place was empty except for Cap. The former river pilot hurried him off into a small side room.

"So they've struck it rich in Pickaxe again!" Cap said, grinning.

"What d'you mean?" Luke looked thoughtfully at him.

"The news is all over town. Sellin' at eighty dollars a share, and I paid twenty for mine!" Cap said, rubbing his bald head, chuckling with glee.

"Oh-h," Luke groaned. "Eighty dollars a share! And me with five thousand of 'em. If I only got fifty dollars each, that's a quarter million beautiful potatoes, eh?"

"They're worth more." Cap grinned and got a bottle of Scotch out to celebrate with.

"They're worth two-bits a hundred," Luke said, and told him. He hated to do that, because Cap's square face slid down to his belt, almost. "The silver in that mine is pure as that they mint in Denver, Cap. Ought to be. That's where it come from."

He waved the bottle of whiskey aside. "We got to get movin', Cap. I promised George John I'd kill Angus. Well, mebbe I won't kill him, but I'm goin' to bust him. And get me my town at the same time!"

A few minutes later two strange figures came to the center of town where Harrick and Main crossed. Each had a barroom table balanced on his head, both were armed. Luke had George John's black-handled Colt at his waist, and Cap had a sawed-off shotgun hanging from a strap under his coat. The streets were jammed with men, mobs of them grouped around a block-long double line that wound through the streets, the head of it in the brokerage office next to the Hotel Angus.

It was a wildly excited mob, men waving bills and pokes of dust, small heavy bags of coins. They were miners and storekeepers, speculators, cowhands from the hills. In short, every man who had the price of one or more Pickaxe shares.

They turned as the two men approached. Over-excited, they laughed at the table carriers. The laughter stopped and they knitted their brows as the two tables were set down in the red mud of the street, and a long, lank man with protruding ears stepped up on top of one table.

From there, Luke could see over the heads of the mob and into the brokerage, where Carl Angus, Ace Cassel and others were taking in money with both hands and paying out Pickaxe stocks.

"Citizens of Pickaxe!" Luke yelled. "We have just set up a branch office at this table." He pulled the wad of shares from his shirt. "I'm sellin' at fifty dollars a share for the next five minutes. Buy 'em while they're hot, because the price is likely enough to go up!"

The crossroads was swept by a roar of voices. The crowd went wild. Above the hats, arms were waving. At the brokerage office, all work stopped. Luke saw Carl Angus and Ace Cassel come to the doorway, stunned looks on their faces.

"We got a couple minutes, Cap. Let's make hay!"

Cap jumped up on the other table. A tight knot of men gathered around them,

waving money and shouting incoherently.

"We're goin' to bust Carl Angus," Luke laughed. "He won't sell a share. Maybe this is what old George John meant about killin' him."

Then he was too busy to talk, filling his hat with money and peeling off shares into the hands of excited men. Glancing up, he saw that Carl Angus, his face sheet-white with anger, his yellow eyes wide, was coming toward him. It won't last long, he thought. Angus stopped in an open space and cried out to the crowd.

"Listen, listen! Those are phony shares you're buying! The real ones are worth eighty dollars!"

THE roar of the crowd subsided as men began examining the shares. Few knew how to tell if they were real or not. But they began to think there was something strange about the cut-price.

A red-bearded miner howled out, "Hey, how come you sell at fifty and they're worth eighty or more, mister?"

Luke had an answer for that. "I don't want much profit. I'm not greedy like Carl Angus. Besides, just for that, the price goes up to sixty!"

That reassured them, and they began buying frantically at sixty. But Luke saw his troubles weren't over. Out by Angus, Cassel and another man were slipping in close, and he glimpsed a flash of gunmetal in Ace's fist.

"Cap," he rasped, "get ready for shootin' trouble. Watch Cassel. I'll handle the money."

Angus was crowding closer. The sale of stock went on, and he could see that his argument was losing. Soon, all available cash would be in Luke's pocket.

"All right," Angus called to the crowd. "The brokerage will sell at sixty also. We'll show you we're not hogs for profit, either."

"But the price is forty!"

As one man, the crowd pivoted toward East Harrick street. There was a black buggy with the top down, and, standing on the seat, a black-haired girl in a red shirt. It had been her voice, a woman's high voice that cut through the low masculine rumble of the crowd.

Luke turned too, and almost fell off the table. "So-o, you black filly," he whispered, "you're cuttin' in!" He looked at her, and her black eyes hooked into his. He saw it then. She was not price-cutting. She was out to break the news that the bonanza was false.

The crowd was quiet now, looking from Angus to Luke to the girl. Luke said quietly, "Do you want to tell why you're selling for forty?" His voice was too low to reach her, but he saw she understood. And her lips framed the words, "You tell."

So-o, there was George John's daughter speaking! Whirling from her, Luke faced Angus, but he spoke to the crowd.

"I'll trade all the stock I got for a bottle of good whiskey. Hell, any whiskey! The mine has been salted. It ain't worth a plug nickel. Carl Angus will tell you that's a lie, but ask George John Harrick's daughter! See what she says!"

And suddenly Carl Angus went crazy. "There's the killer of George John Harrick!" he screamed, his long pale face twisted madly. "He's wearing Harrick's gun and he's selling Harrick's stocks!"

The men in the crowd may have been confused, but they knew one thing. Hell was about to break loose. They drew away, leaving a wide lane between Luke's table and Angus.

"Harrick told me to kill you," Luke rasped. He was leaning slightly forward, still on the unsteady saloon table. "I reckon he was right. There's only one way with your kind."

One leg of the table sank into the mud. He shifted his weight, and that saved him, for a gun roared from his right and caught his ribs and spun him, knocking him flat

on the table. It crashed beneath him and as he went to the ground he thought how deep his chest would be punctured if the table leg hadn't sunk in.

Over his head he heard the roar of Cap Oaks' shotgun. The collapsing table threw him to the ground. He pushed up, on his knees in the mud, and ahead he saw Carl Angus pulling a gun from his coat pocket, his face twisted with insane rage, his eyes narrowed.

LUKE clawed at his own gun, thinking, George John spoke right, you got to be killed, Angus. That's what I was paid for. He laughed as he saw the man's gun explode orange flame and the bullet whistled over his head. Paid! Paid in lead! Still crouching in the mud, he leveled the black Colt and jerked the hammer back. With a roar it slammed against his palm and flame lashed out. He could almost see it chop into Angus' chest. He knocked the hammer back with the heel of his left hand and let fly again.

That must have wakened the crowd to the fact that murder was being done, for the next moment a couple of heavy men piled on top of him, and Luke let them shove him face-down in the clinging mud. . . .

He came to lying on the bar in a saloon. Looking down at him was a pair of soft black eyes.

"The black filly," he said, and he began to grin.

She smiled at him. "You've won your town, Luke."

"Won?" He raised his head. It was spinning so he let it drop down again. "Hell, I lost. That money Cap and me took in isn't ours. I'm broke. No shares, no money. I don't own a good damn' thing in the world!"

She laughed. "They're talking of electing you mayor of the city. They say that since you smashed open Carl Angus' swindle, you deserve it. Ace broke down when Marshal Kearne came back, and told everything. He and Skinny Sheridan murdered dad. And so you've got your town, Luke. They'd elect you king, if we had kings here."

Luke lay there for a moment, thinking. "I'd like a smoke," he said.

He sensed then that there was a crowd around, and several arms appeared, bearing cigars. He lit a weed and sighed deeply.

"Angus?"

"You got him. You've earned your town. Jake Kearne calls it self-defense. You're too much a hero for them to call it anything else."

Luke lay back and smoked slowly. There was a bit of pain in his ribs. Apparently the bullet hadn't hurt him badly. Suddenly he turned to her. "Listen, Hara, it's your town! You forced me to tell them the stock was no good. Heck, I don't want to be mayor anyway. I'm no lousy politician."

"What do you want?" the girl asked quietly.

"Dunno. Maybe a cowranch. A million cows with a state or two to graze 'em on." He pushed up on one elbow and looked into her eyes. "How's that sound?"

"To me?"

"I'm offering it to you."

She sighed and squeezed his hand. So he knew how it sounded to her. "But where are you going to get it? We're both broke."

He laughed at that and took her in his arms. The bystanders, including Cap Oaks, whistled, but they paid no attention to that. "Heck, there must be a cowranch around somewheres, just a-waitin' for us. Reckon?"

"Reckon," she said, and laughed.

And Luke slid down off the bar, anxious to get started. It wouldn't be waiting long.

THE END

B'AR MEAT for HOG JAW

By Tom Roan

Murder! Drought! Blizzard! Fire! Nope, Hog Jaw's citizens weren't a scary clan . . . until the raging flood cast up on their beaten-down town those two furred demons from Hell!

GROWLING and snarling, Mamook managed somehow to hold on to the half-grown cub, sheer old grizzly fury and courage never knowing when to quit. They were in mid-stream, caught in the center of all the currents of

She was snarling now, little pig eyes on the men above her

the muddy flood that had once been a silvery river. Sometimes out of sight, rising again until they seemed to toss, skim and bounce along the water, the old bear was unable to make a swing that would let them reach either bank.

It was spring at its worst in the Montana Rockies. The tossing black clouds filling the heavens since daybreak had turned to whipping sheets of spilling water, the wind howling and lashing, midday so dark and gloomy it might have been night.

The slopes seemed to be washing away, roaring down and pouring into the river with the noise of guns and spouting geysers. The snow on most of the high places had disappeared, turned to muddy torrents, driftwood, old treetops and windfalls coming with them, great stones on the mountainsides beginning to slip and roll, everything going at a terrific speed once it was started, the river catching it all and appearing to lunge higher.

Never afraid of water, the old bear and cub had been down the valley below the cliffs at the head of it, both busy in the berry thickets along the east bank. The rain and the already swollen river had been no reason for a grizzy to notice the coming danger.

A wall of surging water swinging suddenly around the toe of the cliffs had caught them, surging over them in a growing roar, flinging them in the air like bits of driftwood, then sucking and mauling them under.

That had been more than an hour ago, many miles having dropped swiftly behind them since. With the cub clinging to her like some half-dead thing, rarely whimpering now and no longer trying to break away and swim for himself when they passed through short stretches of calmer water, some of the senseless fury had gone out of old Mamook. She was merely floating, keeping herself on top of the flood, making no effort to reach the banks. Even a thick old grizzly head knew the futility of that by now, with towering walls of smooth rock at either side of her, the noise grown into a terrifying roar that seemed to be getting worse every second.

They were going down and down a few minutes later, the river dipping and turning eastward, the walls above getting higher. A long oak log came from somewhere, a great black thing swishing down the river. Instinctively Mamook flapped her left foreleg around it like a curving arm, growling as she held on. As they swung around a long bend the lower country appeared to be rushing up in their faces, a wide and gentle rolling valley beginning to loom in the distance.

THIRTY minutes later it was an old she-bear's come-down from the high and wild places to the little hard-bitten town of Hog Jaw—land of man, her most dreaded and deadly enemy, the frail two-legged creature who was the only thing on earth no sensible grizzly was willing to fight unless forced into it.

Still hanging to the log, ears flat against her head and looking like a mean old wet cat with her half-drowned kitten clawed to her back, she saw the point of what had become an island in the flood ahead. Like all grizzlies her sight was dim. The amazingly keen nose was everything, often able to smell trouble when it was a full-mile away, but with the wind behind her she was almost right on the island before she saw it.

The wild river was splitting here, muddy water dividing into two great, rolling and hissing yellow arms. Ordinarily it swung down the south side of a long, flat-topped rise. Swollen and all out of bounds now it was going down both sides of the rise, each arm of the water a swift and dangerous river in itself.

Low trees and bushes along the rim above it here hid the shabby roofs and

planked walls of Hog Jaw itself. There were forty-odd houses and shacks up there in the center of the rise, its one street a mud-hole in wet weather, a wide strip of dust knee-deep to men and horses in summer.

Knocked loose from the log when the end of it struck a submerged rock, the old bear and the cub were swept to the right, the log spinning away to the left. A few seconds later the old bear's feet touched solid ground and she was pawing and clawing her way up from the flood to a wide, flat-topped bench of rock two yards above the swift river, the cub still trying to cling to her.

This was more like it! Safe on the rock Mamook shook the cub loose and gave him a smack as if to straighten the kinks and the stupidity out of him. The cub sat back on his rump and wailed, always the loud mouth. Mamook shook herself, slinging water in all directions.

The wind and rain had lost much of their beginning fury, storms like this rarely lasting very long. In a few minutes more, not yet aware of the town above them, a feeling of peace might have come to the old bear, but the sudden barking of a dog spoiled everything, instantly souring the grizzly disposition to the bone.

Where the shaggy, wolfish-looking brute had come from was still a mystery, but he was there, a few yards up the slope, his noisy mouth enough to arouse a devil in his den. Bouncing forward and back, never getting closer than six feet to her, he was soon bringing other dogs to the scene, a general mixture of about a dozen curs of all shapes and sizes, long-haired and short. The moment a dog saw her and the cub he set up his roar, the point of the island being quickly turned into a barking and snarling bedlam.

Mamook looked back at the water, the wind still strong enough in her grizzly face to keep even the smell of the dogs and the town above them away from her. One look told her that she had had enough of the water, the tumbling and tossing having been more than a bellyful of terror for any bear. She swung back, old face wrinkling, the fat cub crowding in behind her rump, knowing the best place to hide himself when his mother faced a fight.

The dogs had surged closer, right to the edge of the rock, making a great show of themselves. Mamook squashed herself back on her rump, looking like an enormous and weary old woman sitting there, little pig eyes bright as brass tacks as she gave the noisy brutes in front of her the careful once-over. Never one to be easily scared, something like a grin appeared at one side of her battle-scarred mouth, a snarl wrinkling the other, baring her fighting fangs. Lifting her big forepaws she whipped the air to her, trying to get a smell of them. The dogs must have had the notion she was asking them to come in and fight, their barking rising into a sharper frenzy.

With men left out of it the old bear might have whipped forty dogs, her powerful paw-strokes knocking them into broken and spinning shapes flying through the air, some of their heads parting company with their shoulders. Squatted at the edge of the dangerous water, none of the mean brutes could get behind her, and anything forced to attack a grizzly head-on could expect only the worst of it.

One big red brute with shining pink eyes was almost close enough to smack. Her patience at times knowing no bounds, Mamook waited quietly. Now and then she gave the cub a growl over her shoulder that was a bear's way of telling him to stop his whimpering. Her beady eyes were carefully keeping track of every move the dog was making, knowing in that old grizzly head that—pretty soon now—she was going to slap the belly-busting, gut-flying hell out of that red fool.

A yell on the rim in the wind and rain was the red dog's undoing, encouraging

him to certain suicide. A long-legged, gander-necked man had appeared up there, the tails of his ragged wet raincoat flapping and fluttering, eyes popping as he saw the meaning of all the barking and baying below. His one yell was enough for the red dog to show how brave and smart he could be.

IT WAS a certainty that the dog knew little when it came to attacking a bear —and nothing in the world about a grizzly. In spite of her thousand pounds of fighting bone and muscle, the old bear had been quiet until that man appeared. Sitting squashed back on her big hams, the cub whimpering tearfully behind her, she must have given the dog the idea that she was afraid of him.

The yell on the rim charged the dog to within a yard of her before he could jerk himself to a halt. In an instant he might have bounced himself to one side and just out of danger, but an instant was a long time when one was close enough for a grizzly to reach him.

Without shifting from her squat, right paw a sudden blur of movement, Mamook made only one lightning stroke. It caught the dog on the side of the head, neck and shoulder. As a red flash leaving the wet rock he was suddenly in the air, the one startled yelp of pain and terror knocked out of him. In a curve he flew on to the left, a splash coming up as he struck a few feet out in the water. He went under, then came back, bobbing like a cork in a boiling pool. An instant later the current was whisking him away, a limp thing on the surface and gone on out of sight, his first attempt to attack a grizzly his last.

Sitting back, quietly waiting for another rush if any of the rest of the dogs had fool's courage enough for it after seeing what had happened to the red brute, she was aware of more danger piling up on her. Seven men were now on the rim, the yelling of the first man to appear bringing them running. Below them, leaping, barking, snapping at one another, the dogs were growing crazy. In another minute or two something had to be done around here! That thought was finally maturing in the grizzly's slow little brain.

She was snarling and growling now, little pig eyes on the men above her, seeing an eighth and a ninth appear, then three of them were wheeling to run, going for guns without the old bear knowing where they were going. Suddenly rising to her hind feet, six dogs about to charge her at the same time, she took a step backward. As if her troubles were not mounting rapidly enough, the cub was suddenly wailing. Her backward step had pushed him too close to the edge of the rock. A quick slip and he was back in the water, the swift currents catching him, whipping him away in the opposite direction the red dog had gone.

Despite its being a blunder on the cub's part, very awkward and stupid, at that, it was probably the best thing for the moment he could have done to save himself and his mother. Never one to give up a quarrel very easily, the old bear might have sat there snarling and growling at the dogs until men returned to the rim with their rifles, and a sudden let-loose of high-powered bullets could have ended it, dropping mother and cub right there on the rocks.

To a grizzly mother her cub was everything. Even in the middle of the most desperate fight he was not to be forgotten. One glance at the water spinning him away made her rise with incredible swiftness, startling the dogs into a stumbling fall-back, thinking the devil himself was going to charge them. Before a single dog could recover his balance, she was off the rock, plunging back into the muddy flood with a tremendous splash. With one spin-around, she was swimming furiously, going to overtake the curb or die in the attempt.

AS IT was the entirely unexpected for the dogs, it must have been the same for the men left on the rim. A wild yelling lifted up there, shouts and curses coming down to the dogs, blaming them for the sudden get-away, then the frantic yelping of the dogs drowning out everything as they plunged into a scrambling pack, trying to follow the bears along the edge of the water. Rocks and brush were making the going slow, at times all but impossible, yet none of them were foolish enough to take to the hissing water.

Mamook had the advantage of the situation, at least for the time. The swift currents were sweeping her along with the speed of a racing horse. In a few moments she was putting the dogs behind and herself out of sight, old eyes peering ahead, her desperation making her a splashing fury. As she rounded a blunt shoulder of rocks in the side of the rise she spotted him ahead, bobbing and swinging, just as good at this business of swimming as his mother once there was no one else to do it for him and he had to swim for himself.

Left to decide things for herself, now that she had started, the old bear would have put it all behind her as quickly as possible. She would have kept going until she was safe and far away, then she would have struck out from the water, heading back for the hills and the old den high in the ledges above the river. The cub was not that smart. At the first opportunity he was swinging in through calmer water and going right back to the rise, half way down the south side of it now, a bull-headed young devil seeking a landing place anywhere it was to be had.

Getting closer, growling her warnings and trying to turn him, the old bear had to follow him. He swung in under what was almost a cliff, toes of rock thrust out in the water making a break in the center of it that was like a steep trough reaching to the top. Not knowing that he was about to take Hog Jaw by surprise, he headed right on up, the old bear grizzly-cursing and trying to catch him before it was too late, smelling the danger everywhere around her now.

Old Mamook had mothered few cubs that were so aggressive, so infernally bull-headed. Old two-legged hunters who sought them year after year in the high places could never tell what a grizzly would do. At best their heads were like cannon balls, the fiery brains in their thick skulls as uncertain as cocked guns in the hands of drunken fools. Once firmly getting the notion to do something or go somewhere the devil would never change a grizzly's mind.

Hog Jaw must have been quite interesting when the cub came over the top of the trough-like slope. Curiosity at its peak, he waddled through a narrow alleyway, and stopped to scratch his rump on what had once been a planked sidewalk. There were no dogs in sight, no dogs left up here. All of them were busy at the west end of the rise, still trying to get through the rocks and brush to follow two certain bears down the river, their barking rising as if they had the bears at bay right in front of them.

Fear had left the cub. A notion had probably come into his thick head that there was nothing up here to fear. There were houses to his right and left, most of them board shacks looking ready to fall apart. It was the same across the long and sloppy mudhole that was the street. Most of the two-legged things were indoors, keeping out of the rain. The only excitement was at the end of the street above the barking dogs.

Hearing his big mother behind him, remembering the weight of her smacking forepaws when in a huff, the cub was gifted with another notion. This time it was a sudden and quite business-like notion to move on, itch or no itch tormenting him in the fat backside regions. With his mother not far behind and gaining on him,

he had slopped almost to the other side of the street when a yell startled him.

"B'ar meat! There they go! Good b'ar meat!"

After a long, hard winter, all of Hog Jaw must have been hungry. As a town it was a sad sight at best. Many years before it had had the courage to call itself a mining camp. Gold had been found in the river and in a few spots up and down the valley. Now it was almost a ghost town, the thirty-odd inhabitants still clinging to it not the most industrious people in the country.

The voice up the street was merely noise to the cub. The splintering report of a rifle was more understandable. A bullet smacked the ground under him, mud and gravel splashing against his belly, jumping him forward. As he struck what had been a sidewalk on this side of the street a door in the one two-story house in town was yanked open in front of him, a long, lean man poking his head out to see what the noise was about.

WITH no alleyway right or left, the door was a hole, and any hole right now was good enough for a scared cub. The man made little difference. The cub went in beside him, his right shoulder knocking the suddenly pop-eyed inhabitant in the corner as the sounds of two more shots crashed down the street.

Mamook followed the cub. There was nothing else for her to do. A bullet had nicked her just above the root of the tail, another clipping a groove through the bristles along her neck. As she hog-jumped herself into the doorway the man was coming out. Neither bear nor man stopped to argue. The bear went under, the man over, a wailing two-legged scarecrow stumbling and falling to his knees, bullets plopping behind and in front of him before the excited men up the street could cease firing.

It was a ridiculous situation but there wasn't a thing funny about it to man or beast. This was emergency, a quick place to hide for two startled bears, the wide world outside for a man to run in when suddenly finding himself scared entirely out of his wits without intended provocation on his part or that of his dangerous invaders.

Once Mamook had hog-jumped herself inside the wind slammed the door closed, a rusty iron latch clicking in place, muffling out the most of the first great hullabaloo that had come to shatter the peace and falling-apart quiet of Hog Jaw in many years.

A man indifferent to smells, planks torn from the walls and ceilings for firewood, cockroaches and bedbugs would have called it nice and cozy inside, some indication of heat still coming from the big stove. Trailing on after the cub, Mamook found him in what was yet used as the kitchen. On a lopsided table he had discovered a battered old galvanized tub filled with fish. Having no manners to speak of he had upset table and tub. With everything on the floor he was having a snack, the great excitement he had helped bring down on the head and ears of Hog Jaw already as good as dim history of the far and dark past where his young brain was concerned.

Quarreling out of the side of her mouth, Mamook helped him chomp down the fish, about forty pounds of speckled trout caught from the river the day before when the water was clear. Now she turned on him, bristles up and about to deliver a piece of her mind. The cub was not interested. A big slop pail sat beside the warm old kitchen stove in the corner. He flapped over the pail on the floor and was gingerly sniffing the spill when the old bear hit him a flat paw-stroke straight to the fat rear section, spinning him all the way around, his startled wail filling the house, youth not knowing what had brought on this sudden explosion.

It was time to get out of here! It had been time to keep away from here in the first place. Nose to his nose, cub's rump backed against the apron of the stove, she was telling him a lot of things in an old grizzly mother's manner of trying to poke sense into the fickle, undeveloped and often diabolical piggish head of youth. When she swept up that mean paw again to emphasize her points the cub jammed back, his four hundred pounds snapping the rusty legs under the stove and suddenly banging everything into the corner.

This was hell again, nothing short of it in grizzly language or any other language. Rusty baling wire held the old stove together in a dozen places. As if it had been waiting for years for a chance like this, it was falling apart before it could finish hitting the floor. Above it old pots, pans and rusty tinware followed from a lopsided shelf, the spilling and bouncing clatter loud enough to be heard from one end of Hog Jaw town's muddy street to the other.

The cub jumped to one side now to clear himself from under the falling wreckage, too scared to wail for the second. The one idea in his thick head was to flee, to get the devil out of here! In his hoggish jumps he headed back for the front of the house as if to leave the mess for his mother, now that the damage or whatever it was had been done.

Even old Mamook was scared, crowding back, then rearing to her hind feet, big paws and her front legs swinging like powerful hands and arms, her face wrinkling into a snarl. This was not a good thing! A bear had sense enough to see that. The smell of hot wood ashes and red coals of fire spilled on the floor were making a devilish stench in the room. Old boards cracking under her weight as she weaved from side to side, she saw the stove pipe drop, two rusty joints falling, soot a blinding cloud *swooshing* forward.

It was now time for the old bear to leave the kitchen. Snorting and sneezing, she headed back for the front room, the blinding soot a trailing cloud behind her, big forepaws fanning the air. Anger hit her again when she saw no sign of the cub until an old stairway squeaked and popped to her right as if it was ready to start falling.

THE cub was going up, having found the front door closed and hearing men beyond it. Mamook stopped, glowering at the little window at the left side of the door. Boards covered half the squares that had once held panes of glass. The others were so covered with the dust and grime untouched for years it was next to impossible for even a man to see in or out.

Great excitement beyond the door and the window decided the old bear. She headed up the stairs after the cub, old

planks snapping and popping. A lurch of her thousand pounds against the handrail broke it as if it had been chalk, turning it to kindling wood as it fell to the floor below in a loud clatter.

Upstairs it was not much better, old floors popping in a narrow hall, beds and bunks in small rooms right and left untouched for years. She found the cub in the rear room to the left with his head poked through the broken sash of a window that faced the tall hills to westward across the flat roofs of houses.

Mamook pawed the cub away from the window and knocked him down. She still had things to say to him, giving him another smack that rolled him into a corner, the cub wailing his head off—innocence personified now that he had led her into all this mess and no quick way out of it.

Smoke coming up the stairway with the soot stopped the cuffing, the snarling and grizzly name-calling. The excitement outside was hellish by this time. No man in the crowd down there dared to kick the door down and come walking in on an old grizzly and her cub. Unable to peer through the windows because of the grime and the growing cloud inside, no one was able to get to the rear because that part of the house overhung a rimrocked ledge. The window at the side of the front door was being shattered with the butts of rifles. In that noise were dogs back from their futile chase along the river and setting up a din, rain beginning to thunder down again in its driving sheets.

To Mamook's ears the sounds meant danger steadily growing. To the cub it was evidently just some more noise, nothing to get excited about—and no reason in the world for him to be cuffed for it! The smell of the smoke was getting worse. Neither the old bear nor the cub had sense enough to know that the wrecked stove below had set the house afire, damnation now threatening all Hog Jaw.

Smoke meant something to Mamook. She had seen forest fires in the high places, flames running in front of terrific winds, wild things fleeing for their lives. She turned and poked her head out the window, rain beating in her face, nose sucking in and snorting out the smoke-free air. She stepped back and looked at the cub. The bad brat still sat on his rump in the corner, tears on his cheeks and very sorry for himself. In her growls she told him it was time to get going, out of here and on the way!

Mamook started for the hall, not exactly knowing in her old head where she was going. The smoke drove her back, sneezing and snorting. She glowered at the window, fanning her stub of tail and flicking her ears. The hole was not large enough for herself or the cub to get through. That in itself was enough to make a worried grizzly take a smack at it. Tremendous surprise jumped her back with a snarl when she struck. The entire sash had fallen out, two-thirds of it covered with old boards to replace missing panes.

There was a hole now—a good hole! She drove the cub through ahead of her, taking no more chances with that young know-it-all. He dropped only three feet and was on a flat roof, scared and whimpering, wind and rain swishing. When Mamook plopped down beside him with her half ton of weight the entire roof shook, planking and timbers underfoot cracking, a woman's piercing scream of alarm coming from below.

GET along, you! She gave the cub a smack astern, driving him on ahead of her toward another roof. In the middle here everything was swaying under them, the woman below still screaming, thinking the top of the house was going to come smashing in on her head.

The second roof was better, no woman screaming her ears off under them, but men and howling dogs below in the sloppy,

rain-whipped street were trying to follow them, knowing they had left the two-story and the general direction in which they were going.

On the third roof it was as good as the end of everything—for the roof. It was too old to stand the fourteen hundred pounds of bear-weight rocking across it. Everything started shaking, planks and timbers groaning, popping and cracking. When they were half across and the weight centered in the middle of it the old roof was no longer strong enough to stand the swaying load. With a final snapping and ripping crash everything gave way, old Mamook and the cub going with it, the rain driving sheets on the sudden wreckage, men yelling somewhere and dogs howling like a swarm of terrified baboons.

It was a fall-in from one end to the other. Once the long room of a saloon, its windows were gone, the planked bar and the rest of it that would burn having disappeared for firewood in other houses. With openings at either end the dogs from the street were pouring in, getting the jump on everybody before they could be shouted back. Now they were between the men with rifles and the bears, the noise one hellish din.

Mamook was up in a crouch, cub behind her, still the fighting old mistress of the high places and not to be bluffed or addled by the big noise. She was like a wrestler swaying and bobbing, powerful arms swinging as if sparring for a quick hold, little tail fanning, eyes two beady buttons burning in the mean grizzly face. She backed on like that, grinning and growling, making her best grizzly threats, and reached what had been a rear doorway. Floundering on top of the broken-in roof, leaping and barking, the dogs yet had sense enough to stop their crazy lunging and charging just beyond the old bear's reach.

A shot got through in spite of the dogs as the bear backed on, a sudden cloud of splintering old wood showering her face and head from the side of the ragged doorway. Cub safe below, she dropped on outside, the rim of the rise back here only a couple of yards away. Below the drop-off, eighty feet down, was the curling muddy flood that was the north arm of the divided river.

The cub was whimpering and wailing again, but he had turned in the right direction, facing the hills to westward, though they were too far away for a bear's short-sighted eyes to see them. Mamook gave him a spat to the rump, then wheeled like lightning to catch a dog that had come too close, smacking him down across the shoulders and knocking him in the air. With a howl he went off the rim, terrorizing the rest of the brutes into a tumbling fall-back for a few seconds.

By this time the two-story behind was beginning to divide the attention of the Hog Jawans, forcing half to fall back and get busy. The coming of the bears had given the town its first great burst of activity in twenty years, and fire in the two-story was heaping excitement upon excitement. Without the terrific downpour of rain it would have probably meant the final and everlasting end of Hog Jaw, house after house burning until only blackened heaps remained.

A LONG ladder had been brought up from somewhere. Six men with axes had gone up, getting to the long flat roof to plug the drains in the rear end of it, making it a catch-basin, then beginning to knock scores of holes in it, turning it into a sieve to pour streams of water in on the flames. With no bears to face inside others had kicked down the front door to brave the smoke with pails of muddy water scooped up from the overflowing holes and puddles in the street.

Merry hell behind and merry hell on their left flank, Mamook and the cub were

going on, trying to get themselves out of it, the old bear having wanted no part of it in the first place. The dogs were hot behind them, crazier than ever. Actually they were a blessing now and then because the swarming brutes were holding back the gunfire, men with the rifles unable to shoot without hitting them.

Cut off from going around the end of it by the overhang of an old house ahead, the cub went under, being only half the size of his mother. Mamook hesitated, snarling, fanning her forepaws at the dogs, instinctively knowing the danger. In spite of it she had to follow the cub, the low floor overhead making her drop to all-fours, then to almost a crawl, no room under here to wheel or even turn.

It was golden opportunity for the dogs, the first real chance for them to come dashing in and make a flying attack from behind. A big old black bitch led the way, a lean gray brute slightly behind her right shoulder, all the others coming but more cautious until the black and the gray were biting at the bear's behind.

For a few moments it was like forty devils fighting under the house, a woman screaming and running out to the street in the rain above them, pots and pans falling from the jarring of the floor. Black dog hanging to her tail, the gray dog gnawing at her ham-strings, the old bear twisted and snorted her way on through, lifting the corner of the house with her shoulders and letting it fall with a rumbling noise from end to end as she fought her way out and from under, the dogs suddenly letting go of her.

A moment later a man with a rifle jumped into being from around the corner of a house ahead of them, a long, lean gent so popping-eyed and white-faced with excitement he evidently did not see the cub until it was too late. He fired one shot, the bullet stinging the old bear's hip and killing a dog behind her. At that instant the cub was trying to hog-jump past the man, knocking his legs from under him and throwing him forward on his face. Mamook might have killed him with one good, downward blow. As if he was not worth it she hooked her left paw against his arm and right side. With a snarl she gave him a sling, and the yelling two-leg was over the rim.

With half the men of Hog Jaw yelling, all the women screaming, the dogs a baying hell, Mamook lunged on, far better used to the business of fighting with her back against a ledge or a big rock.

The cub was just about to go under another house when a growl and a quick spat on the rump turned him to the rim at the top of a slippery trail twisting its way down the side of the flat. Once on the trail he wanted to turn back, not liking the spilling water around his feet. Mamook had to spat him on and keep the dogs off at the same time until they came to the edge of the river.

Again the cub tried to turn, and again old Mamook smacked him, knocking him off a low ledge and into the water. Grunting like a hog, she plunged in behind him, having had enough of Hog Jaw for the rest of her life. This time half the dogs were following them, the rest left barking up there on the trail.

Swimming dogs behind unable to do much barking, it was an almost quiet getaway. Instinctively Mamook hugged the base of the rise, keeping the cub in front of her. By the time they had come to the lower end of the rise the courage of the swimming dogs had deserted them. Swinging in through more placid water they climbed back to a low toe of the bank, content now to bark, jump and snap at each other as they watched the old bear and the cub sweep on down the river, the currents taking them toward the north side of it, a dozen easy landing places ahead.

SEVEN-FOOT— PRINCE OF PIZEN!

By Bill Colson

Tough Shorty Shamrock, who'd fought from hell to breakfast with fists, boots, knives and guns, wasn't sure he could stomach the brand of fighting peculiar to that devil's deadfall called Oro Fino. . . .

SEVEN-FOOT Sanders was never quite straight in his mind as to how it all came about so sudden. Sure, he'd staked Jug Blandly, but that was nothing unusual; he'd never hesitated to dig down for a friend. Besides which, Jug had paid off his debt long ago.

But as things have a way of happening, Jug passed on; wafted somewhat messily on his way by a large chunk of lead that took him where he was of the greatest girth; a wild bullet that had not

He hurled a bottle to pick a bothersome battler off Seven-foot's back

A "Seven-Foot Sanders" Story

been aimed at Jug but which blundered into him, in the way of wild bullets, and killed him deader'n a sheeptick.

Gutshot as he was, Jug was a man who took considerable killing, and there was time for a friend to scribble out a few words on a scrap of butcher paper, and Jug had strength enough to sign it.

And Seven-foot Sanders found himself one day a stage driver and the next a man of property. He had inherited Jug Blandly's saloon, The Oro Fino.

It was a nice hunk of property, as such things go, for the Oro Fino was located on the best corner in the town of Forty-mile, and Forty-mile drew all the trade for miles around; riders from the valley south, timberbeasts from the hills north, and a scattering of miners and such who lived where they could.

Seven-foot stopped just outside the batwing doors of the place with a sudden reluctance. He looked around at Shorty Shamrock with a peculiar anxiety on his face.

"What the hell am I supposed to do?" he asked Shorty. "What do I—how do . . .? Oh, hell!"

"Ra'r back," Shorty advised. "Th'ow out your chest. Ra'r back with your shoulders. Walk right in, and pucker up —*an' spit right in the middle of the floor.* Hell, man, You own the place!"

"Ahrrg!" said Seven-foot disgustedly. But he elbowed Shorty aside and tramped in.

"Hya, boys," quoth the man behind the bar in automatic greeting, turning to reach a bottle off the back bar at the same time. Then his head snapped back and his eyes jittered for a moment.

This was not so unusual. While Seven-foot wasn't quite, his six feet and eight inches towered quite a respectable distance toward the ceiling. His face made one think of a kindly but ill-fed horse, for though Seven-foot tipped the scales at something over two hundred pounds, it was spread so thin as to be almost ridiculous.

Shorty, on the other hand, was plump. He had a round, cherubic face, with a pair of innocent baby-blue eyes.

While it was not true, as Seven-foot sometimes said it was, that Shorty would burn his own grandmother to light a smoke, those eyes had fooled many a man who should have known better.

Therefore the barman could be expected to gape slightly; for while Seven-foot alone was enough to make most men look twice, the pair of them together added up to near incredibility. But barmen are a notoriously tough-minded breed, and this one recovered admirably.

He spun glasses into position, uncorked, poured, recorked, replaced the bottle.

"Mud," said Shorty.

"In yer eye," responded Seven-foot. They drank.

Again the business of uncork, pour, recork.

"Home," said Seven-foot sadly.

"And mother," responded Shorty sorrowfully. His round hand had captured the bottle from the barman and set it familiarly close to the glasses.

"We'll call you if we need anything," he assured the man, who eyed him dubiously and retreated reluctantly.

AT THE end of an hour, Seven-foot and Shorty surveyed the Oro Fino in the glow of a very definitely rosy light. The level in the bottle had diminished to near the vanishing point, and they had toasted General Grant and General Lee, the beauties of Love, Honor and Truth; the sovereign state of Missouri and its most distinguished son, the Missouri Mule. They were just raising their glasses in a gentlemanly toast to a lady of their mutual acquaintance, a lady of many frailties of the flesh but of manifest beauty whose name was Cinnabar Rose, when

the fight started down the long bar.

Four large gentlemen had entered the place while the pair had been sampling the wares of the bottle. These gentlemen were clad in loud plaid shirts and their trousers were stagged off at the tops of their high laced boots; boots which were wide of sole and punctuated with steel calks; and their talk was of low stumps and windfalls and widow-makers and cat-faces.

A little farther down the bar stood some four or five other gentlemen. These last wore wide-brimmed, high-crowned hats, and their boots were narrow and needle-toed, with high heels and with spurs strapped to them. Their talk was of critters and crowbaits and rimfire rigs and salty broncs; and what touched off the explosion will probably never be known for sure, but words like 'cow-nurse' and 'sawdust rat' were exchanged between the two groups, and one of the largest of the calk-booted gentlemen smote one of the spurred-booted ones squarely and with great force on the nose.

One of the rider's companions plucked a bottle from the bar and walloped the offending timberbeast across the noggin with such violent dispatch that the bottle smashed, and the timberbeast lay down across his own victim and snored noisily. The bottle-wielder was promptly presented with five balled knuckles to the teeth, which caused him to fall back and spit messily, and then things got a little confused.

Shorty, with commendable presence of mind, salvaged their bottle, and he and Seven-foot retreated carefully around the end of the bar, and found a vantage point where the battle might be watched with comfort and lack of danger.

The barman leaped atop the bar, with a three-foot butt of a billiard cue in his hairy hand, and he slugged, with enthusiastic impartiality, at whatever head presented itself within range. Then someone across the room threw a chair, and the barman was swept off his counter and into the back bar from whence he collapsed on the floor to the jingling accompaniment of musically breaking glass and the heart-stirring splash of the contents.

Shorty quoth sorrowfully, "A turrible waste of good drinkin' licker, Long Feller."

Seven-foot agreed sadly. He tipped up the bottle, having neglected to bring a glass with him, and even as the bottle pointed at the zenith—or in this case the smoky rafters of the Oro Fino—the thought struck him. An uncontrollable snort wheezed up from his lungs, and whiskey sprayed out from his wide mouth. An expression of shocked outrage came on his bony face.

"Heavens," he said, "to Betsy! Shorty, this is *my* place they're breakin' up!"

Whereupon, he placed one hand on the bar, vaulted his tremendous length over the top, and waded into the fray.

He grasped the first two battlers he came to, placed a hamlike hand on the collar of each, and brought their heads together with a sharp crack. He dragged a suddenly limp body in either hand to the door, and dumped them outside.

A diminutive puncher, whose valor quite over-reached his size, cocked himself on tiptoes and swung at Seven-foot's jaw. He missed by a foot. He looked up in startled amaze, backed off, took a run at it, and leaped in the air, swinging a rapid, if futile, one-two. He had better altitude this time, but still his fists crossed harmlessly in the air at about the level of Seven-foot's Adam's apple.

Then Seven-foot clamped one hand on the little one's collar and the other on his belt and the batwing doors crashed back to the limit of their hinges as the small one flew through, flapping his wings like a startled dickey-bird. However, despite the flappings, he lost altitude

rapidly, and his sudden alighting made considerable noise on the planked walk outside.

AFTER that, the batwings never did come to a complete halt. Some of those who left so hurriedly were walking; walking with considerable velocity, that is; and some staggered, and some flew. In fact, the exodus of cash customers drew considerable notice to the Oro Fino.

Seven-foot worked like a nailer. He had lost his hat, and his shirt consisted of two cuffs, a collar, and one strand that depended from the collar, on which two buttons were left and he perspired as he labored.

Shorty was seated on the back bar, with a fresh bottle cuddled in his lap, and with a piece of soap he made a mark on the bar mirror every time the batwings crashed ajar.

Once, he hurled a bottle to pick a bothersome battler off Seven-foot's back, and he whooped such encouraging remarks as, "Do it again, Long Feller—muh brudder didn't see it!;" but on the main, he kept an eye on Seven-foot's back and marked score.

Then, suddenly, there was a great and conspicious quiet in the room. Seven-foot leaned against a wall, his chest heaving as he gasped for air, and Shorty triumphantly drew a line through the picket fence of soap marks on the mirror, looked around and grinned, "Where'd everybody go?"

The barroom was a mess. A hanging lamp swung gently by one wire, dangling the other two broken ones below its canted base. The bar sagged at one end, and half the shelves of the back bar were gone, and their liquid cargo with them. A crack zagged across the mirror like a frozen bolt of lightning, and the brass footrail had lost its sense of direction.

There came a deep and heartfelt groan from the wreckage behind the bar, and the forgotten barman pulled himself shakily into view. He had a shanty hung on that kept him from seeing from that particular eye, and when he spoke the words whistled through a new gap in his teeth.

He looked at them forlornly, and Shorty suddenly remembered something. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Elmer," said the man.

"Elmer," said Shorty grandly, "meet your new boss. Mr. Seven-foot Sanders here, is the new owner of this deadfall."

Elmer did not say 'howdy-do'. He did not say 'pleasta-meecha'. He simply swiveled his good eye back and forth between Seven-foot and Shorty and cradled his head in his hands. His were the words prayers are made of, though he used them in different sequence.

Then he said, "I'm sick, and I'm goin' home." He left, and Shorty Shamrock and Seven-foot Sanders looked at each other across the wrecked interior of Mr. Sanders' inheritance.

LATER, Shorty regretted that he had not dropped a lighted match into the highly inflammable rubble behind the bar. But it was not for several days that he realized fully what had happened.

Seven-foot closed the Oro Fino for a week. It took that much time—and all the money Seven-foot could dig up—to fix the place up again. While carpenters and painters and glass-fitters labored expensively, Seven-foot wrapped his long legs around the legs of a table, his face wrinkled with the effort of figuring, and his teeth clogged with splinters from gnawing pencils.

He was preoccupied to the point of being short and abrupt with Shorty, and he even refused to do much drinking. On the day the glass-fitter told him the new bar mirror was going to cost him two hundred dollars plus freight, Seven-foot

howled like a trapped wolf; and to Shorty, sitting at a corner table nursing a bottle, the sound was full of dismal forebodings.

The re-opening of the Oro Fino was an occasion. Seven-foot had a new suit, and his resplendency almost made Shorty gag. "Why," he said witheringly, "the coat and pants *match!* An' look at them shoes!"

Seven-foot craned his neck and did look. But instead of shame, his face showed a smug complacency.

"What's the matter with 'em?" he demanded.

"Matter?" said Shorty disgustedly. Again he looked at the articles in question. They were of the 'gaiter' type, of black kid, ankle high, with elastic inserts in the side to fit them snugly to the ankle, and they shone with an almost blinding luster. And there was a lot of them to shine.

But Seven-foot wasn't waiting to hear any more. He moved over to the bar, clapped a perfect stranger—and a timber-beast at that—on the back, and asked with heavy heartiness if everything was going all right.

It was, the grinning 'beast assured him, and quaffed off another of the free drinks the house was setting up. Seven-foot laughed loudly, as at a very gay witticism, and moved on down the bar.

The next day was worse. Seven-foot had acquired a heavy gold watch chain, which was swung across his belly from one vest pocket to the other, and instead of the usual brown-paper cigarette pasted in the corner of his wide mouth, a blond, and manifestly very expensive cigar was cocked up at a jaunty angle from between his teeth.

He no longer strode—he sauntered. He had on a different necktie, still a limp bow, but wider, and undeniably—even across the width of the room—of silk. And once he coughed, and Shorty groaned aloud.

For Seven-foot drew a snowy white handkerchief out of his breast pocket—and *daintily patted his lips.* Shorty snaffled a bottle, retired to a rear table and proceeded to get quietly and thoroughly drunk.

Shorty had a horrible hangover the next day. The worst of it was, he didn't have anything to do, and no place to go, which made the hangover worse, for he had nothing else to think about to take the curse off.

He groaned his way out of bed shortly before noon, and wended his pain-wracked way to the Oro Fino. He tried a bit of the hair of the dog, and it nauseated him. He looked around for Seven-foot, but that gentleman was deep in a conference with a whiskey drummer, and a cigar salesman was killing time at the bar waiting his turn to see the proprietor of the Oro Fino.

Seven-foot's mouth wasn't its usual humorous width. His lips were clamped around one of those high-yaller stogies, and he was speaking forcefully about quantity discounts and freights costs to the drummer.

Finally he was finished with the drummer, and he spotted Shorty at the bar, and came over, waving a hand at the cigar drummer and telling the man he'd be with him in a minute.

He clapped a hand on Shorty's wincing shoulder and demanded, "How's it go, old hoss?"

SHORTY said suddenly and miserably, "Long Feller, let's git out of this. I can't stand it. I've always thought if I had all the licker I could drink, an' nothing to git up for but my meals, I'd be so tickled I'd git right down and waller in it. But hang it all, Long Feller, I got no job, nothin' to do, but just sponge off'n you, and it ain't no good." He looked up at Seven-foot and repeated, "Let's git out of it, Long Feller."

Seven-foot looked down at him with a sort of surprise, and then suddenly he chuckled.

"Shorty," he said, "you'd better close them eyes 'fore you bleed to death." His cigar tilted upward as he grinned. "Know what's the matter with you? You're hung over—clear down to here, an' I never seen you yet with a head but what you was ready to be converted. Besides," and now Seven-foot's voice was suddenly brisk and businesslike, "you take a look in the till. Know what we took in last night? A hunnert an' twenny bucks. Course, it ain't all profit, but that's a month's wages for the pair of us handlin' the ribbons."

"Yeah, but look . . ." said Shorty miserably.

"All right, all right," Seven-foot said with a briskness that was nearly irritation. "you want something to do. So as of right now, you're the official bouncer." Then he grinned his old familiar wide grin, and cuffed Shorty roughly again. "Bout time I was gittin' some good out of you, anyway. Now I gotta see this bird about some cigars."

Shorty didn't like bouncing. He had an almost occupational phobia against the breed, and it had been his proud boast in times past that he had trimmed the wick of many a one. But now he was a bouncer, and he did not like it.

Not that the work was so strenuous. Most of the belligerent ones were drunk, and size had never cut much ice with Shorty. The bigger they were, he figured, the more resounding the crash when they came down.

Which was still true. An enormous timberbeast stood at the bar, the second week of Shorty's tenure, and to all indications he had at the very least been sniffing the cork. Moreover, he was proud of his size, his name, and his abilities.

"I can," he declared, "jump higher, squat lower, spit furder aginst the wind, dive deeper—and come up drier than any this, that and t'other in this thus and such saloon!"

No one challenged the statement.

"Me father," he declaimed further, "was a orry-eyed gray wolf, and me mother was a catamount. When I'm in the mood, I'm a ring-tailed hurricane—and I feel a blow comin' on!" So saying, he bent down and bit a large chunk out of the edge of the bar top. "Me name is Widder-maker Murphy," he howled, "and there's me mark. Bow low, ye swamp rats, lest I turn loose me hurricane!"

Shorty came up behind him and remarked conversationally, "I think it's mostly wind, at that."

The self-styled Widow-maker wheeled joyfully, but his face fell as he caught sight of Shorty. "Stand back, little man," he said, "else I squash you like a bitsy bug."

"Out," said Shorty. "Outside. You're making too much noise."

The Widow-maker stepped back, and his eyebrows shot up in amazement. Then as it soaked in that this runt was ordering him out, he growled happily and swung a fist the size of a maul in a sizzling arc.

Shorty went under it. His fists made a muffled drumming on the big man's belly, and the air came whistling out of the Widow-maker's throat. His guard came down, and Shorty's fists took a tuck in his already scarred nose, and closed one eye. The Widow-maker roared and charged again, and Shorty went around him like a cooper 'round a barrel, tightening hoops and fitting the head.

It went on for quite a while. The Widow-maker was a bleeding hulk, kept on his feet only by sheer animal strength. He was blinded, both eyes swelled shut by Shorty's hard fists, and he staggered under Shorty's merciless chopping.

Then he made another blundering, wild charge, and went down—not because

Shorty had hit him, but because Shorty wasn't there. He stumbled, and sprawled on the floor—and then he was struggling up, weaving, beaten, blind; but still trying. And Shorty was suddenly shamed—a deep, sickening twisted shame that went through him like a dull knife.

FOR he had done it deliberately. He could have knocked the man out at will any time after those first two blows to the face. But he hadn't. He had taken all the distilled meanness of the past weeks out on the man. The hangovers, the animal spirits that had had no outlet, his disgust with himself and Seven-foot—and he had deliberately beaten a man near to death, and for no reason than that he'd let a situation sour him.

He let the man get up. Then he struck a quick, merciful blow that the Widow-maker never felt. The Widow-maker crashed down and snored soundly.

Then Seven-foot came sauntering along the length of the bar, and said warmly, "Nice goin', old hoss. I thought fer a minute he might be too big for you, but you fixed him, and never busted a thing doin' it." He swung around grandly to the rest of the room, and shouted, "Up to the bar, gents. This one is on the house!"

Shorty stood staring at him. His chest swelled and fell, working with his past labors, and he stared at Seven-foot.

Then he strode to the bar, picked up a bottle, cocked it over his shoulder—and hurled it straight through the middle of the huge mirror.

"I quit," he said. "Damn it all to hell, I quit!"

He wheeled away, and then Seven-foot's big paw came down on his shoulder and turned him back around. Seven-foot's bony face was anxious.

"Look, pardner," he said uncertainly, "what . . .?"

"No pardner o'mine," retorted Shorty savagely. "The Seven-foot I knew wouldn't be caught dead in a get-up like that." He reached up and twitched the flowing silk bow tie awry. He looked Seven-foot up and down, and sneered. "No, you ain't my pardner. Slappin' people on the back, butterin' 'em up so's they'll spend a lousy buck over the bar. Figgerin' pennies on freight, hagglin' about discounts, milkin' the drummers for free cigars—hell with you, Seven-foot Sanders, you an' your fancy shoes. I'm leavin'!"

"Aw, now," said Seven-foot in a hurt voice. He reached out a hand again, and Shorty cuffed it roughly aside. The barman, seeing the violence of the gesture, and sure that the next one would be aimed at Seven-foot's jaw, came over the bar with the sawed-off billiard cue.

Shorty saw it coming, and ducked. The man standing behind him sighed at the crack of the cue and collapsed gently. A friend shouted angrily and made for the barman. A timberbeast, figuring now was as good a time as any, felled a rider who happened to be handy. Somebody slugged *him*. Somebody's shoulders drove into Shorty from behind, and he skinned his nose against Seven-foot Sanders' fancy watch chain. Seven-foot's huge paw went over Shorty's shoulder and made a loud smacking noise, and the weight went off Shorty's back. He dimly heard a musical crash as one of the swinging lamps went out, and then Seven-foot had an arm around his shoulders and was dragging him around into the sheltered angle of the bar.

SEVEN-FOOT paid no attention to the sound of battle raging through his saloon. Instead, his worried, bony face demanded, "Shorty, you didn't mean it, did you? You ain't pullin' out?"

"Damn tootin'," retorted Shorty vigorously. Then, despite himself, his tone softened. "Look, Long Feller," he said.

"I just chopped hell out of a man for no reason. You an' me, we been in fights, plenty of 'em. But we fought for the hell of it—or 'cause somebody tromped on our toes; but we never fought for meanness. It scared me. If I'll deliberately cut a man up like that with my fists, there'll likely come a day when I'll shoot a man the same way—just 'cause I got the chance and the sign is right. Hell with it. I'm goin' out where the sun and the rain can hit me. I'm goin' to do an honest day's work, so's the meanness is worked out of me a little. I'll take my few bucks and buy me a drink I can enjoy—cause it won't be ever' day, and my head won't be like a balloon already . . ." Just then a surging tangle of three fighting men rolled into them and jammed them into the tight angle of the wall against the long bar.

From deep down in his chest, a joyous whoop came out of Shorty, and he shoved away from them and sprang up on the bar. He dove off into the milling battle, and he grinned as he cut through them, clear across the room. He collected a split lip and a mouse under one eye, but he was grinning, and he felt fine.

Then something hit him under the ear and he went down, automatically curling his legs against his chest and wrapping his arms around his head for protection against the trampling boots on the floor. He heard a booming roar, and dimly recognized it as Seven-foot Sanders' war-whoop, and he got his feet under him and came up. It was Seven-foot, all right, and he was plowing his way to Shorty. His tie was dangling, and one end of his fancy watchchain swung free, and even as Shorty looked, a clawing hand took every button off the checkered vest.

Seven-foot roared, "Over here, Shorty!"

And Shorty yelled, "Comin', pappy!"

With workmanlike dispatch and smooth teamwork that rode on the oiled bearings of long practice, they cleaned the bar. And even as the last sprawling figure slammed the batwings ajar, they became aware of the heat and the muffled roaring that had been at their backs for some time.

The Oro Fino was afire. One of the lamps had come clean loose of its brackets and wires, and it rested in its pool of billowing flaming oil. Already the flames had mounted to the ceiling, and the dry boards were licking up flames as if they'd been waiting for them.

For just that one startled instant, a protesting sound came from Seven-foot Sanders' throat. Then he looked at Shorty.

They neither of them had a whole garment on them. Fists had marked them, and they perspired visibly, and panted for breath. But somehow, it was Shorty and Seven-foot again, with all the walls torn down between them, and Seven-foot grinned widely, and said, "Gettin' warm, old hoss. Let's you and me call it a day."

"Right," said Shorty. Then he remembered, and he made a frantic leap over the bar and dragged the smoking cash drawer from under the bar and stuffed greenbacks and gold into his pockets. Seven-foot nodded careful agreemen, and plucked a pair of bottles off the back bar and tucked one under each arm.

Then without a backward glance they strode out of the Oro Fino—out into the dark night, and when they zigged, it was together, and when they zagged, it was in unison. The roof of the place fell in, and the shower of sparks that spiraled up behind them carried away all their differences.

Shorty hummed a little tune as they walked. And a big grin stretched Seven-foot's face.

CUSTER FORGOT —AND DIED!

By Victor Lygdman, Jr.

PERHAPS never before did one people misunderstand and abuse another people so much as did the white men when they encountered the American Indian. With but few exceptions, they failed to see the Indians' motives and feelings as the Indians themselves saw them. In nearly all cases they expected the Indian to conform to white men's laws while they in turn ignored the ancient Indian customs.

But it was ever thus with victorious nations. How can conquering soldiers be expected to stop in their looting of rich lands and treasures to consider soberly the plight of their defeated enemies?

The men who were probably in more contact with Indians than any others, except for the Indian agents, were the soldiers who guarded our frontier. It was their duty to preserve the peace when possible, to protect Indian rights and to fight Indians when they went on the warpath.

Some of them performed these duties with admirable exactitude, brilliance and courage. Others did not. But few of them really understood the people they dealt with.

General George Custer didn't. He would not have died at Little Big Horn if he had. He would have survived to tell his tale if his memory had been better or if his conception of the Indian had been such as to focus attention on details which he passed over as meaningless.

It was in 1859 that this little incident occurred, the incident which resulted in Custer's death because he ignored it. In that year, Sitting Bull, then a medicine man and minor chief, visited the East as one of a delegation of Sioux chiefs. During his trip, he also visited West Point, where he met Cadet George Custer. The two young men liked each other, and the Indian proclaimed Custer a "blood brother."

The years rolled by, and General Custer's star rose to great heights. He became a great Indian fighter, and something of a writer as well. In the midst of all this activity, he probably forgot many of the "trivial" incidents of his younger days.

ON JUNE 26, 1876, Custer's regiment, the historic 7th Cavalry, was surrounded at Little Big Horn by about two thousand Sioux and Cheyenne warriors. The rest is history.

For many years there was a mystery surrounding the "massacre." (Actually, the Indians had been attacked first by Custer and Reno, and they were defending themselves, their squaws and children in attacking the soldiers.) The few Indian scouts in the Army's employ who survived the battle were unable to tell the whole story. Each saw a part, and each story contradicted a part of another. Two of the scouts, for instance, claim they were the first to shake Custer's hand when they first joined his regiment. One spoke of Custer's long hair flowing in battle, while another said he had his golden locks tucked up under his hat.

From such narratives, it was impossible to piece the whole story together. Then, in June, 1927, Hearst's International Cosmopolitan magazine ran an article in which Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance told his story. Long Lance had been one of the Sioux chiefs opposing Custer.

If Custer forgot the blood brother ceremony, Sitting Bull didn't, for on June 22, 1876, four days before the battle, Sioux scouts reported the advance of the blue-coated cavalry. According to Chief Long Lance, when Sitting Bull learned that General Custer was leading them, he gave orders to all his braves that the general was not to be harmed. And no Indian bullet or arrow was fired inten-

(Please turn to page 130)

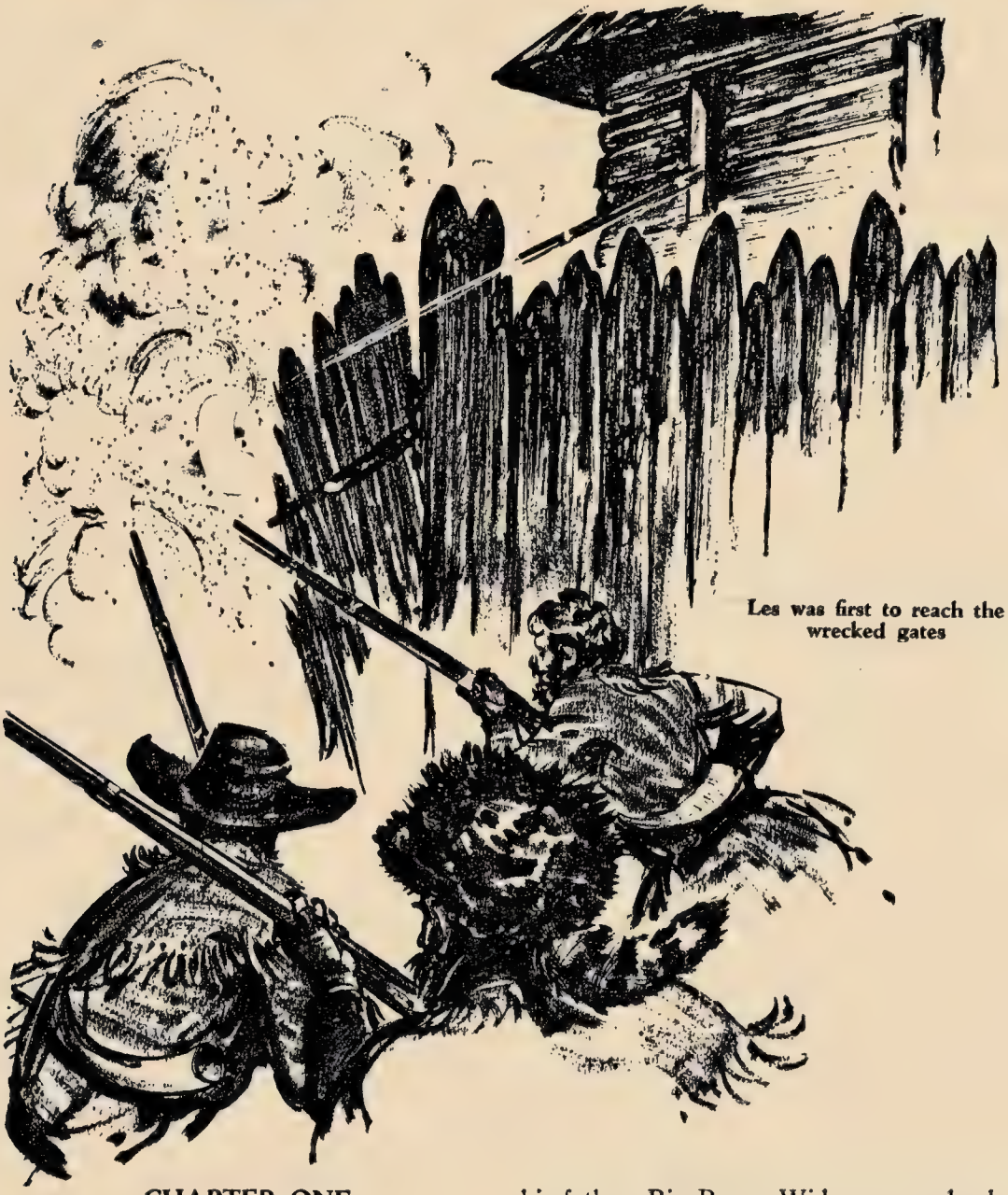
NIGHT OF THE

By
Ray Gaulden

At first those hardy mountain men figured to sell their plews at a right fair price. . . . Then, as the awful power of the wilderness spoke, they figured to sell the pelts for whatever they could get. . . . Finally they found that, instead of their precious fur—they must barter with their lives!

LONG KNIVES

A Novelette



Les was first to reach the wrecked gates

CHAPTER ONE

Canyon of Death

LES WIDMAN glanced about the thick-walled log cabin, making sure they hadn't overlooked anything, then he went back outside where his father, Big Rance Widman, was loading the bales of fur onto the Indian ponies. For a moment Les stood there and looked at those bundles of beaver pelts and thought of the long, tough winter they had spent here in the Little Rockies. He guessed he should feel satisfaction, but

the winter's catch didn't mean much to him and all he felt was an aching emptiness deep inside.

A dull look in his eyes, he walked to the nearest pony and tested the pack, making certain it was tied down tight. Impatience began to rub him and he looked at his father. "About ready to pull out?"

He was a bear of a man, this Rance Widman, with thick black hair curling about his large ears. When he had finished loading the last bale, he stepped back, grunting with satisfaction. "All set, son," he said, glancing toward the cabin. "Hope you didn't forget anything because we ain't never comin' back. Tomorrow we'll hit Bear River Post and I figure Emmett Garland will pay top price for these plews. With what we've already saved, we'll have that stake we been workin' for, and we'll buy two tickets on the first packet for St. Louis."

There were somber shadows in Les' eyes and a faint twist to his lips. "Yeah," he said. "We can tell 'em all to go to hell now."

Big Rance frowned and looked at him closely. "Damn it, son, snap out of it and quit eatin' your heart out over that girl. I know it was tough to take, but she's married to Grover Garland now and you've got to forget her."

Bitterness washed across Les' eyes and he said roughly, "Let's get going."

Les Widman looked a lot like his father, but he wasn't as heavy. His legs were longer, his hips slimmer. He had changed to clean buckskins and was wearing new moccasins. His wind-burned face was clean-shaven for the first time in months. Turning now toward his pony, he was about to mount when he caught the sound of a horse splashing across the little stream that ran past the cabin. Les recognized the rider as Jules Fabin.

A scowl darkened Big Rance's weather-roughened face and he muttered a curse. "Better stay close to your rifle, son. I don't trust that skunk as far as you can throw one of these bales of plews."

Fabin had none too good a reputation in the mountains. Most free trappers, Les knew, didn't like the man. They suspected he'd been robbing their traps but they had never been able to prove it. Fabin claimed he had his own string of traps, but Les didn't know of anybody who had ever caught him working them. Yet Fabin always had plenty money to spend for Taos Lightning.

Les spoke to his father, but he kept his eyes on the approaching rider. "I don't think he'd be fool enough to try anything against the two of us."

"Just the same," Rance growled. "I ain't takin' my eyes off him."

HIS face stony, Les stood there watching the big, rough-featured man come closer, and Les was remembering that he'd already had one run-in with Fabin. At the free trappers' rendezvous last year, Fabin had attempted to take his mad out on a young Sioux. Les took it up and they put on a fight that would be talked about for a long time when mountain men gathered.

Les Widman had walked away from that fight, leaving Fabin bleeding and battered on the ground. Afterwards, Fabin claimed he'd been drinking too much, that if he had been sober the fight might have had a different ending.

Fabin was grinning now as he pulled up in front of the cabin, and if there was animosity in the man, Les couldn't find it in his eyes. "Looks like you gents did all right for yourselves," Fabin said, eyeing the bales of fur.

For a moment, Les studied the big trapper, wondering if there was a flicker of greed in those yellow eyes. He wasn't sure. Glancing at the small pack on Fabin's pony, he said, "Looks like you didn't have much luck. Never knew a

man to put in a winter and not come out with more than you've got."

The grin stayed on Fabin's lips. He shifted his weight. "I didn't do as bad as it looks. Caught myself a couple of silver fox, so I couldn't see no sense of workin' much after that."

"Silver fox is worth plenty," Les admitted.

Big Rance said sharply, "Well, let's don't stand here gabbin' all day."

Straightening in the saddle, Fabin picked up the reins. He said, "I don't want to hold you fellas up. I was just passin' by on my way down to Bear River Post." He glanced at Big Rance and then put his eyes squarely on Les. "I figure it was a dirty deal you got down there. Grover Garland steppin' in and takin' your gal away from you like he did."

Les stiffened, anger rippling through him. He said thinly, "Keep your dirty face shut, Fabin."

The grin was gone from Fabin's lips now and his yellow eyes were narrow and mean. "I ain't drunk now," he said darkly. "Mebbe you'd like to try and shut it."

A ridge of muscles along the left side of his jaw, Les started around his pony. But Big Rance stepped in front of him. "Hold up, son. Much as I'd like to see you climb that big thing's hump, we ain't got time for it now. There's a lot of miles ahead of us and we're already late gettin' started."

Les stood there, the anger slow to drain out of him. He gave Fabin a hard stare. "You better be riding, fella, and keep out of my way."

The big trapper's lips pulled down and he said derisively, "I didn't figure you'd be so tough when I was able to take care of myself."

Big Rance grabbed his long rifle and whirled around to face Fabin. He said flatly, "It wouldn't take much to get me to shoot your belly off. Now get goin'!"

There were plenty of men in the mountains, Les knew, who could tell you that Big Rance Widman wasn't a man to fool with when he got riled, but if there was fear in Jules Fabin, it didn't show in his eyes. They were chilled and ugly as he let his mount feel the heels of his moccasins.

The tension ran out of Les, but his face was still set in harsh lines and a voice back in his head kept screaming at him, taunting him with what Fabin had said: Grover Garland stepped in and stole your girl.

The sound of his father's voice brought him out of it. "Come on, son, don't let what that skunk said get under your hide. We got to get movin' or we ain't gonna reach Beaver Jones' place by dark."

Ten minutes later they were heading down out of the mountains, Les leading the way along the narrow trail through spruce and pine. His dark eyes were moody and he was hardly aware that Big Rance was back there behind him, singing a lusty mountain ballad. Big Rance, who three years ago had come to the mountains to make a stake; who had worked hard trapping the streams for the valuable beaver. And always, Les remembered, his father's talk was of the day when he would have it made and could go back to civilization and buy some little business.

"A man's a fool to stay here in this wilderness," Big Rance often said when they were sitting around the stove during the long winter evenings. "Country like this will make an old man out of you in a hurry, and as soon as folks get tired of wearin' beaver hats this business will be shot. But we've saved our money and we'll get into somethin' where there's a future, mebbe in a city like St. Louis where there's somethin' to listen to besides the wolves howlin'."

Les didn't share his father's dislike for the mountains; in three years the country had come to mean a lot to him and, at first, the thought of going away didn't

appeal to him. But now, because of the deep hurt in him, he was ready to leave the mountains forever.

THEY came to White Deer Creek, where cold mountain water flowed swiftly in a rocky bed, and they continued along the bank of the little stream for a mile or more. Buckbrush grew here, and staring into those thickets, Les told himself that a man could be hiding in there, a fur thief, waiting with a long rifle in his hands. Then Les laughed, wondering what had made him think of something like that. He laughed but was unable to shake off a vague sense of impending danger.

About fifteen miles yet, Les knew, before they reached the cabin of their old friend Beaver Jones. There they would have supper and spend the night. With an early start in the morning, Les figured they should reach Bear River Post shortly after noon.

The trail turned away from the creek and they entered a narrow little canyon, gray rocky walls rising on either side. Les stared at the rocks, that sense of uneasiness in him growing.

Big Rance was back there behind him, still singing about a man who was a devil with a Green River knife. Suddenly a rifle cracked from the canyon rim and Big Rance quit singing. Les threw a quick glance over his shoulder and saw his father pitch to the ground.

His rifle in his hands, Les leaped down. He saw a thin spiral of smoke up on the rimrock, but no ambusher. With dread pushing him, he ran back to Big Rance's crumpled figure, dragged him quickly into a nest of boulders. Kneeling, he ripped open the buckskin shirt and his lips tightened as he saw the ragged hole.

Another rifle ball screamed off the rocks, sending sharp splinters into Les' face. He crouched among the rocks, trying to locate the man on the rim. There was nothing except a thin coil of smoke above a clump of piñon. He fired in that direction, then waited, doubting his shot had found the ambusher. He wondered if it was Jules Fabin. The big trapper, he figured, wasn't above something like this.

It could be Fabin, or it could be somebody else. There were many renegades in the mountains, men who thought nothing of taking a life to get their hands on a few pelts. Then too, there were Indians who were not always friendly toward the white man.

Les poured powder into his rifle, tamped it and reached for a cap. Worry darkened his eyes as he looked at his father. Rance was in a bad way, but wasn't complaining. His face was gray but he managed to grin.

"Don't worry about me, son. Go ahead and give 'im hell."

Les moved his eyes back to the rim, his rifle ready, but the ambusher was well hidden. Sweat broke out on Les' face and he felt it running down his back. This canyon was a death trap and he knew they would never get out of here alive, not as long as that gent up on the rim kept them in his sights. Their only chance, Les decided, was for him to get around behind the ambusher. He turned to Big Rance, who was lying there gritting his teeth against the pain in his chest.

"Sit tight," Les whispered. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

HE SHOWED himself briefly, his insides jumping as another rifle ball screamed off the rocks. Then he leaped up and ran across the rough floor of the canyon, gambling he could reach the other side before the ambusher reloaded. His breath came past his lips in a sigh of relief when he reached the other side. He pressed against the wall, wondering if the rifleman had seen him make the dash. Keeping close to the wall, he began work-

ing his way down-canyon. He was sure he couldn't be seen from the rim. The ambusher, he thought, would be doing some worrying, trying to figure out what had happened to him.

He reached a spot where the wall wasn't so steep and he started to climb, going up swiftly, silently. When he'd gained the top, he started moving along the edge, his moccasins making little sound. Then he stopped, head tilted a little as he listened to the swift drum of hoofs. He swore softly. Evidently the ambusher had lost his nerve when he let Les out of his sights.

Anxiety pushing him, Les hurried back to the nest of boulders where he had left the old man. He found his father still, eyes closed, face drawn. For a moment, Les was afraid that Rance was already dead. He dropped to his knees and then Big Rance opened his eyes and tried to bring a grin to his lips.

"This is a hell of a way to die, son. I didn't even get to fire a shot."

Les felt the bottom drop out of his stomach." You're going to be all right," he said. "It's not far to old Beaver's place. I'll get you down there and we can patch you up."

Widman shook his head. "I know I ain't got but a minute, son. You can bury me down at old Beaver's place. There's a big pine tree a little ways off from his cabin, remember? It ain't what I had in mind but it'll do. Funny, but I never figured I'd play my string out here, but I reckon a man don't think much about a thing like that. Anyway, you go ahead and sell the plews like we planned. Get out of these damned mountains. Go back to civilization and like like a white man ought to. Go and...."

His lips kept moving a little, but no more words came and Les knew he was gone. A sense of helplessness filled Les as he hunkered there. Finally he arose and rounded up the ponies. And when he had tied Big Rance across his mount, he headed down the canyon. His eyes were wary and he kept his rifle in his hands until he was out of the canyon. Then he relaxed a little. It was still daylight and there was open country between here and Beaver Jones' cabin. He didn't think the ambusher would try again—not now anyway.

Grief rode with Les Widman now for he and Big Rance had been close. Les didn't remember his mother, but he knew she had died on a farm back in Ohio. For Big Rance there had never been another woman. He had worked hard all his life and he had come to the mountains to get a stake so they could set themselves up in business back in civilization. And now, Big Rance Widman, with the breath and the dreams smashed out of him, was heading toward a lonely wilderness grave.

ON ELK CREEK, old Beaver Jones had built his cabin, a crude, one-room shack that could have stood repairs. But as long as he had a good bed to sleep in, Les knew the caustic-tongued old trapper didn't care much about anything else. He came to the doorway when Les rode up, a long, bony man with a face that reminded Les of old rawhide. Three years ago, in St. Louis, Les and Big Rance had sided the old trapper when two riverfront toughs attempted to waylay him, and it was Beaver who had talked them into coming to this wild raw country. The three of them bought tickets on the first packet bound for Fort Benton, and during the long journey up the Big Muddy they had become good friends.

The old trapper stood there now, squinting in the half dark, trying to make out who it was. Then he recognized Les and came forward, a smile lighting his face. "Les, boy. Thought it was about time for you and Rance to be showin' up. What—" he broke off, staring wide-eyed at the limp form across the spotted pony.

"What's the matter with him?" he asked shakily.

Les climbed down stiffly, his face like stone. "He's dead, Beaver. Some dirty son was waiting for us in a canyon over east of here."

Jones' face showed more emotion than Les had ever seen. The old trapper muttered, "It's kinda hard to believe. He was always laughin' and singin'."

They fell silent, not talking any more until they had dug a grave out beneath the tall pine tree and laid the blanket-wrapped body of Big Rance into it. When the task was done, Beaver took the shovels and went back to the cabin, leaving Les alone beside the fresh mound of dirt.

Darkness had closed down when Les returned to the cabin and took care of the ponies. He carried the bales of plew inside and found Beaver cooking supper. Les wrinkled his nose at the smell of the place, wondering how long it had been since the cabin was cleaned.

"Where's your squaw?" Les asked.

Beaver was bending over the stove, turning two thick pieces of venison in a big iron skillet. He said without looking around, "She ran off, but I figure on gettin' me another one when we get down to Bear River."

Les sat down at the grease-stained table. The venison smelled good but he didn't feel hungry. He said, "Have you been down to the post since last year?"

The old trapper nodded. "Was down about a month ago after some flour. Emmett wasn't feelin' so good and Grover was runnin' the post. He said he wasn't goin' to pay as much for plews this year."

A frown ridged Les' forehead. "That's funny. I talked to a trapper the other day that had just come back from Rocky Mountain Fur Company, and he said they was paying the same as last year."

"Well, tomorrow, we'll find out what Grover is payin'," Beaver said. "You still figurin' on makin' this your last winter here? You figure to quit trappin'?"

Les nodded, his eyes thin and hard with purpose. "I'm still leaving—but I've got a killer to find first."

"You think it was Jules Fabin?"

"I'd be willing to bet on it. But I've got no proof."

Jones put the food on the table and pulled up a chair. When he'd filled his plate, he said, "Saw Arlene while I was down at the post."

For a moment, Les Widman's heart stopped beating, but he kept his face straight. "How was she?" he asked.

There was a sour pucker to Jones' lips. "She didn't look too good to me. I figure mebbe she's been doin' a lot of worryin' over that husband of hers. If you ask me, that Grover's no good. I don't see why he didn't stay in St. Louis; spends most of his time there, anyway, drinkin' and gamblin' away old Emmett's money. And, dad bust it, I can't see why Arlene didn't marry you instead of—"

Temper thinned Les' lips and he said roughly, "Better finish your supper." He stood up and looked at the bales of plew stacked against the wall, but he wasn't seeing them. Without looking around he said, "Think I'll get to bed. We want to get an early start in the morning."

THEY reached Bear River Post the next afternoon. Emmett Garland had built the fort here close to the river, built it strong to withstand Indian attack. The walls were twenty feet high, made of square, handhewn pickets. There was a cupola to the left of the stout double gates, where a guard was constantly kept. The gates were open now, a sign, Les knew, that the Blackfeet were not causing any trouble at present.

Les and Beaver Jones rode into the stockade and dismounted. The old trapper looked toward the row of low-roofed cabins built against the back wall of the fort. "I'm going over to the store and

have a drink," he said. "You comin'?"

"Go ahead," Les told him. "I want to see how Emmett's coming along."

Crossing the compound, Widman passed the short-barreled cannon that was kept pointed at the big double gates. One of Garland's engages came by and Widman stopped him. "Where'll I find Emmett?"

The man pointed toward the end building and Les thanked him and walked on. He reached the flat-roofed structure and rapped lightly on the door. It opened presently and Arlene stood before him, a small girl with dark hair and eyes and a slender, shapely body. She was just as lovely as ever, he thought, but there were lines about her mouth that hadn't been there a year ago.

"How are you, Les?"

"Not too bad, Arlene."

She was the daughter of a river gambler who had been killed in a card game quarrel down at Fort Union. Arlene, Les knew, had no other kin and so when Emmett Garland, her father's friend, offered to take her in, she had accepted. Emmett had been good to her. He treated her like his own daughter.

From the first, Les had loved Arlene and they had seen a lot of each other at the rendezvous two years ago. They'd laughed and had fun. Last year, Les had come down intending to ask her to marry him, only to learn she had already wed Grover Garland.

He stood there now and felt the old yearning well up in him and he tried to fight it down, reminding himself that she was another man's wife. But he couldn't help remembering how it had once been.

Her eyes were on his face and he tried not to look at her for he was afraid he couldn't keep his love for her from showing. And he wasn't kidding himself; he knew he'd never be able to get her out of his mind.

She must have sensed that he was in trouble for she said quickly, "You came to see Emmett?"

Les nodded soberly. "How is he?"

Arlene glanced over her shoulder, her eyes dull with worry. "He's been sick for a long time. We don't know what it is; some kind of fever, I think. He suffered a lot last night and was half out of his head. But he's sleeping now."

Stepping past her, Les walked quietly into the room and stood beside the bed, looking down at the still figure beneath the patchwork quilt. Emmett Garland's eyes were sunk back in his head, his cheeks thin and flushed. There was a heaviness inside Les, for Emmett was his friend. The factor had made a name for himself here in the wilderness. Free trappers knew him to be an honest, generous man with whom to deal. Les knew he had made many friends, even among the Blackfeet. And Garland paid more for the furs he bought, claiming he didn't care about getting rich overnight like some of the big companies farther down the river.

Arlene stood at the foot of the bed. Les was aware of her presence, but he didn't look at her. He turned and started for the door.

"Come back later, Les. I know he'll want to see you."

He looked out into the sunlight compound. "I'll be back," he said. And when he had stepped outside, she came again and stood in the doorway.

She said hesitantly, "Les."

An odd feeling inside him, he stopped and looked around. "Yes, Arlene?"

Her lips trembled slightly and she said, "I—oh nothing." Then she stepped quickly back inside and closed the door.

A PUZZLED frown ridging his forehead, he stared after her, wondering what she had tried to say. She'd never told him why she'd decided to marry Grover and he wondered if this was what she had on her mind.

A little bewildered, he walked along the row of cabins, heading toward the store building. A door opened and Grover Garland stepped out and stood waiting for Les. He was a handsome young man, tall and well put together. But when you looked at him closely, you saw a weakness about his mouth.

He said coolly, "Hello, Widman."

"Hello, Grover. I was just over to see your dad."

"Yes, I know."

There was something in the man's tone Les didn't like, something that rubbed him the wrong way, but he tried to keep his temper down. "I'd like to show you some of the pelts I brought down."

Grover stuck his hands in his pockets. "I've already seen them, and they don't look too good."

"Are you trying to be funny?" Les stared at him hard. "They're prime plews, worth top price and you know it."

A little flicker of annoyance came into Grover's eyes and he said pointedly. "I'm running things here now, Widman, and I can tell you I'm not paying what Emmett did. The old man's too soft-hearted for a business man. Me, I'm here to make a profit."

On the store porch, Beaver Jones stood talking to a fat Indian woman. Les glanced in that direction and then put his eyes back on Grover. He said, "Emmett never complained about what he was making, and he told me he was showing a fair profit. But like you say, you're the boss now. What are you paying?"

"I'm not going higher than three and a half." Grover's face was expressionless.

Les felt himself stiffen. "You really mean that?"

"I'm not just talking to hear myself."

Anger rose up in Widman; it showed on his face and in his eyes. "They're worth twice that here," he said, "and a hell of a lot more in St. Louis. Mister, you'll never buy mine at that price."

Grover Garland's shoulders lifted in a shrug. "It's a long ways down the river to Rocky Mountain Fur Company, and I hear that the Indians between here and there aren't friendly. Of course, they're your plews."

Temper flattened Les' lips and he said thinly, "I'll pack 'em clear to St. Louis on my back before I'll let you have them for three and a half, and I've got a hunch the other trappers are going to feel the same way."

A thin smile played about the corners of Grover's mouth. "They weren't too happy about it, but they'll come around, I think, before they'll go all the way to Rocky Mountain."

His face tight with anger, Les turned and stalked away, afraid that if he stayed longer he wouldn't be able to keep from driving his fist into Garland's mouth and busting a few teeth.

Leaving the Indian woman standing on the porch, Beaver Jones came quickly across the compound. He frowned, looking into Les' stormy eyes. "What's the matter, son?"

Les kept moving. "The damned crook," he said hotly, "won't pay more than three fifty."

"What do you think he's tryin' to pull?" Beaver swore luridly. "You suppose that old Emmett knows what's goin' on?"

"I doubt it." Les shook his head.

When they had reached their ponies, Jones turned and looked at Grover, still standing there where Les left him. A scowl darkened the old trapper's face and he growled, "I bet he'd feel different if he had to trap the stream one winter."

Les laughed, a dry, humorous sound. "I bet you'd have a hard time getting that fella into the mountains." He mounted and put his eyes briefly on the row of cabins, but there was no sign of Arlene. "Come on," he said, "and let's see what the other fellas have got on their minds."

CHAPTER TWO

Bear River Rendezvous

THEY left the stockade and followed the river for a half mile, heading for the bend in the stream where the free trappers held yearly rendezvous. Les saw that most of the mountain men had already arrived. A big fire had been built and they were seated around it, bearded, rough-talking men in greasy buckskin. They fell silent at sight of Les and Beaver and a lanky, long-jawed man arose and came forward. This, Les knew, was Ben Toland.

"We been waitin' for Big Rance," Toland said. "Where is he?"

Les stared into the fire, his eyes somber. "Big Rance won't be here. He stopped a rifle ball on the way down."

Silence weighed heavily upon the group for a moment and Toland stared at the backs of his big hands. Finally he said, "We was waitin' for Rance; thought mebbe he'd know what we oughta do."

Warmth spread through Les, lifting him for a moment. These men, he knew, had always looked to his father for leadership.

Old Beaver Jones bit off a chew. He said, "We might as well figure on packin' our skins down the river in the mornin'. Ain't no use stickin' around here hopin' Grover will have a change of heart."

"It's a long ways down to Rocky Mountain," Les reminded. "And from what I hear, we might not get there with all our hair."

Toland hunkered down and threw a couple of sticks into the fire. His face was sober. "We've heard the Blackfeet are raisin' hell down the line, and it might be a tough trip, but I'll be damned if I'm gonna let my pelts go for nothin'."

A murmur of agreement ran through the crowd and Les moved his eyes over them. Then he looked at Beaver Jones. "We'll go down to Rocky Mountain if we have to, but first let me go see old Emmett."

"What makes you think that'll do any good?" Beaver asked.

Les stared into the fire, his eyes thoughtful. "Maybe not any, but Emmett has always treated us right, and I want to find out if he knows what's going on."

By the time supper was over, the mountain men were in higher spirits. Several jugs of Taos Lightning were being passed around and Les grinned faintly, noticing that old Beaver Jones was making sure he got his share.

Deciding that he'd rather walk in the cool night air, Les left his pony at the camp. He headed for the post, walking along the river bank. The moon came out and shed its light on the water. Chokecherries grew here and he could smell the wild roses.

There was still a killer to be found, he reminded himself and he wondered where Fabin was; he wondered if the big trapper would show up here or if he was afraid to.

A faint whisper of sound reached him and he stared hard into the darkness. Then he saw a figure up ahead, coming from the direction of the fort. Les kept walking and presently they met.

"White Cloud," Les said, recognizing the young Sioux.

A smile lighted the Indian youth's smooth face. "It is good to see you again."

Les grinned. "What are you doing out here in the dark of the moon?"

"White Cloud on his way home. Been down to post to trade."

"I'm heading for the post now," Les told him. "And I reckon I better get going."

The Indian's face was serious. "White Cloud don't forget what you do for him last year. That Jules Fabin bad man."

Les put his hand on the youth's shoul-

der. "Take care of yourself, White Cloud."

REACHING the post, Les found the big gates still open. There was lamplight in several buildings and he headed toward the one where last he'd seen Emmett Garland. As he passed a dark doorway, the sound of Arlene's voice brought him up sharp. He turned, unable to see her at first, but he could hear the sound of her breathing and he knew she was there. He went a step nearer, frowning, wondering why she had called to him.

"Yes, Arlene?"

"Les, I want to talk to you."

There was urgency in her voice and he moved closer. "I was going to see Emmett," he said. "I thought maybe he'd be awake by now."

"He's awake, but I wish you wouldn't see him."

"Why, Arlene?"

"Because I think I know what you want to see him about. I think you intend to tell him about Grover."

The moonlight didn't reach the doorway, and he couldn't see her face, but he was aware of her presence and he was conscious of the ache down inside him. And then he thought of old Beaver and the others back at the camp and he said, "Have you got any idea how your husband is running the post? Do you know that he won't pay more than three fifty for prime plew?"

She sighed wearily. "Yes, I know, Les. I've tried to talk to him, but he won't listen. I don't know what's the matter with him; he's had something on his mind ever since he came back from St. Louis a few months ago. But, Les, Emmett is sick; he's a little better tonight but still in no condition to worry about Grover."

His face serious, Les glanced toward the cabin where Emmett Garland lay, weak and sick. "I didn't stop to think about that, Arlene," he said heavily. "I guess the only thing for us to do is try to get our pelts down to Rocky Mountain."

A sound in the darkness caused Les to turn and he had a glimpse of a figure cutting around the side of the log structure. His nerves tingling, Les took a step back. He had a hunch it was Grover even before the man was close enough to be recognized.

"I had a feeling you two'd be seeing each other tonight," Grover said thinly. "I guess her being married doesn't mean anything."

Irritation stirred in Les and his eyes narrowed. "Now wait a minute, Garland, before you get yourself worked up. I was just talking to Arlene about your dad."

"Don't hand me that, Widman." Grover was standing stiffly erect and his breath made a thin, sharp sound between his teeth. "I know how it is. You two used to be pretty sweet on each other."

Arlene stepped quickly out of the doorway and moved up beside her husband. "Grover, please." She put her hand on his arm, but he shook it off and he didn't even look at her. Les thought he smelled whiskey on the man's breath.

"You saw her today, Widman." Grover's voice was flat and ugly. "But it was daylight then, so you sneaked back here tonight."

Les felt himself go rigid. "I never sneaked anywhere in my life," he said levelly. "I came here to see Emmett."

A sneer twisted Grover's lips. "I can imagine."

Unable to control the fury inside him, Les hit the man, drove his fist hard into Grover's mouth. The blow snapped Grover's head back and he stumbled up against the front of the cabin, remained there a moment, shaking his head. Then he came forward, his eyes like hot coals in the darkness, and Les thought, You hot-headed fool. You can't get out of it now. You'll have to fight him.

He wasn't a mountain man, this Gar-

land, but he was lean and well-muscled, and he knew how to take care of himself. He had more skill with his fists than Les Widman, who was used to the savage, eye-gouging type of fighting popular among wilderness men.

Grover came in, swinging at Les' face. Les' head rocked back but he didn't give ground. He threw his right hard but Grover went under the blow. A harsh laugh broke from Grover's lips and the sound brought anger surging anew through Les Widman. He forgot Arlene was watching. He forgot why they were fighting. All he could think of now was that here before him was a man trying to beat the hell out of him.

THEY were in the moonlight now, away from the buildings. The taste of blood was in Widman's mouth and he felt the sticky stuff running down the left side of his face. Grover was coming in again, fast. This time, Les rolled his head and the blow only grazed his cheek. He saw an opening and his right whipped forward. Grover went down. He hit the hard-packed ground and lay there a moment.

It took him seconds to get his feet under him, but he finally managed it. Lunging forward, he swung wildly and Les sent him to the ground again. But he wouldn't stay down. He got up and stood there weaving, out on his feet. Les couldn't bring himself to hit the man again.

"Fight, damn you!" Grover muttered thickly.

Les felt a touch of admiration. The man was whipped but he wouldn't admit it. "To hell with you, Garland," Les said without heat.

As he started to turn away, Arlene came running to her husband's side. Her cheeks were pale and Les saw the distress in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Arlene," he said lamely. Then he turned and walked swiftly across the stockade, past the short-barreled cannon and through the gates.

He went down to the river and washed blood from his face. There was a feeling of remorse inside him. Now that he had time to think about it, he wondered if he wouldn't have acted pretty much the way Grover did if he'd come upon his wife talking to a former sweetheart in the darkness.

Heading back down the river, the wind was cool against his hot cheeks. As he drew near the camp uneasiness touched him for there was no sound of the drunken revelry he'd expected. He moved faster, wondering why there was not the bright glow of the fire. The mountain men should still be up.

He reached the river bend and drew up abruptly, shocked at the scene. The fire flickered feebly and, sprawled around it, were the mountain men, some on their buffalo robes and some on the hard ground. Numerous gallon jugs were lying back from the fire, thrown aside, Les figured, after they'd been emptied.

Widman listened to their snores, remembering how they'd been passing those jugs around before he left. He shook his head slowly, a wry slant to his lips. The fools. The irresponsible damned fools.

Beaver Jones lay on the hard ground, his head close to a smashed jug. Les went over to the old trapper, knelt down and shook him roughly. "Wake up, you likker-guzzling old devil."

Finally the old trapper blinked his eyes and put his hand on Les' chest, trying weakly to push him away. "Go on," he muttered, "an' lemme sleep."

It was no use, Les decided. He stood up and looked at the many bundles of fur, and he thought of Jules Fabin. What a set-up this would have been for the thief. He could have walked calmly into camp and gotten away with a fortune in prime beaver pelts.

After he'd built up the fire, Les sat down

and put his back against one of the bales, deciding he'd sit guard until some of the men had a chance to sleep it off.

A cloud hid the moon for a while and beyond the circle of firelight the darkness was like a wall. Time dragged and Les sat there listening to the wind through the cottonwoods along the river, and he thought about the long trek they'd start tomorrow.

The wind died down after a while and silence closed in. His eyes grew heavy and he rubbed the backs of his hands over them, but it didn't help. He didn't know when he'd ever been so sleepy. His eyelids felt as if there were weights on them. Weariness pulled at his body. If he could just sleep for a few minutes. . . .

HE DIDN'T know how long he slept, but he came awake suddenly, an alien sound in the night penetrating his sleep-drugged senses. The whisper of moccasined feet caused his scalp to tighten and he tried to roll away, but he wasn't fast enough. Something heavy struck the back of his head and he went to sleep again. . . .

He came to with the sound of Beaver Jones' voice in his ears, and he wished the old man wouldn't talk so loud. There was a sharp pain back of his eyes and he didn't try to open them for a few minutes. His head was throbbing and a groan slipped past his lips.

"Looks like he's comin' around," Beaver said.

Then Les recognized Toland's voice. "Pour a little likker down him, Beaver. That ought to help some."

A tin cup was pressed to his lips and he felt the fiery stuff running down his throat. He gagged and sat up, his eyes watering. Toland and Beaver looked a little fuzzy at first, but he blinked his eyes a few times and saw them better. They were sorry sights, he thought, red-eyed and haggard. He grinned in spite of the way he felt.

"You gents look awful," he told them. "And where did you get that likker you poured down me. Figured you must have guzzled everything in camp."

They both shifted uncomfortably and they seemed to have a hard time looking at him. Finally Toland said, "We're a bunch of damned fools and I reckon it'd serve us right if we never saw them plews again."

Beaver nodded gloomily. "I guess you're right, Ben, but I'll be damned if I'm gonna crawl back to my cabin with my tail between my legs. I'm gonna try to find the skunks that stole them pelts."

Les touched the back of his head and winced. He figured whoever had delivered that blow had meant to kill him.

The mountain men were a surly, mean-tempered bunch as they squatted about the fire. Les guessed they must have felt pretty sick. Those pelts represented a whole winter's work. Their sale meant food for the trappers—coffee, flour and beans, clothing and new traps and a few jugs of Taos Lightning to help pass the long mountain nights.

The furs were gone, stolen, and Les couldn't help but blame himself a little. If he hadn't fallen asleep. . . . He turned his head, listening to a sound beyond the clearing. Someone, or something was moving through the brush. The others heard it too and Beaver picked up his rifle, his eyes wary.

Les caught the drag of moccasined feet, and a moment later the brush parted and White Cloud came staggering into the clearing. He stopped a little short of the fire and stood there swaying, looking dazedly about him, as though he wasn't sure he'd come to the right place.

Forgetting about the pain in his head, Les went forward quickly. "White Cloud, what's wrong? What happened?"

There was blood on the young Sioux's face and his lips were tightly pressed. He whispered, "First, give me drink."

They helped him over to the fire and

eased him down on a buffalo robe. When he'd had a drink, the Indian glanced about him, then put his dark eyes on Les Widman. "Guess White Cloud too late. Looks like men already steal plews."

Interest sharpened Les' eyes. "What men?" he asked quickly.

White Cloud wet his lips with the tip of his tongue. "On my way home, I come across white man's camp down the river. I hide in the brush and hear them talking. There is Jules Fabin and many others like him. They drink a lot and Fabin does much talking. He boasts of killing Big Rance. He said he intended to kill both of you and steal your plews."

A little bunch of muscle quivered along Widman's jaw and his eyes were like flint. He knew the Indian was about all in, but he had to hear more. "Go on, White Cloud."

The Sioux licked his lips again. "Fabin talked of the many furs here at this camp. They make plans to steal them and sell them to Grover Garland. I start back here to warn you, but make noise and they hear me. They shoot. I hide in brush and I guess they think they have killed me. I have to rest a lot, but somehow I finally get here."

White Cloud lay back and closed his eyes. Beaver knelt beside him and worked swiftly. "He's lost a lot of blood," Beaver said. "But he'll pull through all right."

When he'd done all he could, Beaver arose and looked at Les. "What do we do now?" he asked.

Les picked up his long rifle. He said, "Fabin must have taken the plews to the post. There's a skinny chance he's still there."

Old Beaver's eyes were thoughtful. "Where do you suppose he got the bunch to help him?"

"Renegades and half-breeds," Les answered. "There's plenty along the river who'd cut their grandmother's throat for a dollar."

CHAPTER THREE

Free Trappers Die Hard

THE sun was barely up when Les and the others came in sight of Bear River Post. They moved through the tall pine trees, each man carrying a full powderhorn, a long rifle and plenty of caps and balls. Twenty bearded, grim-faced men in buckskin, ready for battle.

When they reached the high buckbrush a hundred yards from the fort, Les held up his hand and they halted. The big gates of the stockade were closed now, a good sign, Les figured, that Fabin was inside.

Then one of the trappers got a little careless and showed himself. Les swore softly just as a gun roared from the cupola to the left of the gates. He saw the muzzle sticking through a rifle hole in the thick logs.

"Spread out, everybody!" Les yelled, and in another minute a dozen rifles had opened up and were pouring shot from the stockade.

Beaver Jones was beside Les, his face tight, his rifle in his hands. They were down on their bellies, returning the fire, and then suddenly one of the mountain men yelled in pain. Les looked a little worried. He knew they would be cut down, that they would never be able to get inside the fort. The walls were high and there was too much open space between them and the gates.

Les was ready to call a retreat when a great roar came from within the fort. Something heavy struck the big gates and there was the sound of splintering timbers. One gate was ripped from its leather hinges, the other hung crazily. Les remembered the cannon and knew that somebody had fired it.

Inside the stockade the rifles were silent for a moment and Les figured the cannon shot had brought confusion. He jumped

up, yelling at the others, "Let's go!"

They went forward, running and weaving. Some went down but the others kept going, Les leading them, and he was the first to reach the wrecked gates. He leaped over a splintered log and was inside the stockade. Mountain men poured in behind him, old Beaver yelling like a crazy man. There was the pound of rifles and there was smoke and confusion. Men were running and yelling and cursing.

A big, long-haired renegade was climbing down from the cupola to the left of the gates, and Les laid the butt of his rifle against the man's head, putting that one out of the fight. Les glanced quickly about and saw a man running across the compound toward one of the buildings. It was Fabin, and sight of the man caused Widman's lips to tighten. He started after the big trapper, moving swiftly along the wall.

He had a glimpse of Arlene, standing in a doorway with a smoking rifle in her hands, and Les felt a spark of admiration. Here was a real mountain girl—not one who cowered back in some corner when there was fighting to be done.

Jules Fabin ducked into a cabin and shut the door. Les wasn't far behind. He drew up outside the door and heard Fabin cursing. Les kicked the door open and leaped into the room. He saw that Fabin's rifle had jammed. The man was working it frantically. He stopped when he saw Les and a little shadow of fear danced across his yellow eyes. He started moving back and Les stalked him.

"I'm going to kill you, Fabin."

The big trapper licked his lips. "Give me a chance, Widman. My gun's jammed."

Les shook his head. "You didn't give Big Rance a chance."

THERE was sweat on Fabin's face and a desperate look in his eyes. He was back against the wall and couldn't go farther. He moved suddenly, flinging the heavy rifle. It struck Les on the left shoulder and knocked him off balance. Like a mountain cat, Fabin was on him, tearing the rifle out of his hands. The weapon fell to the floor and Les caught the flash of a Green River knife. He grabbed Fabin's wrist and they strained against each other. Les broke away and whipped out his own knife and was ready when the trapper moved in.

Fabin's knife arced and Les felt the steel cut the flesh of his arm. The renegade moved in for the kill. Les weaved and the blade missed by inches. He stepped in quickly and drove his own knife into Fabin—to the hilt.

A little sick, Les staggered outside. The firing had ceased and he saw that most of the free trappers were still on their feet. Beaver Jones came running up. "Grover's over by the cannon. Wants to see you."

Young Garland was propped against one wheel on the cannon. He had his left hand pressed against his side and Les saw blood oozing through his fingers. The man's face was ashen but he managed a warped smile. "I sure played hell with those gates, didn't I, Widman?"

Les stared at the man. "*You* did that?"

Grover nodded. "And got one of Fabin's rifle balls in me for it."

Arlene came running across the compound and knelt beside Grover. She uttered a little cry when she saw the wound in his side and she glanced quickly up at Les. "Help me get him inside."

Grover shook his head. "I like it better here." He put his eyes on Les. "I guess you pounded a little sense into me last night, Widman. Caused me to do some thinking. You see, I'd gone down to St. Louis to have one of my flings, and I lost most of dad's money playing poker. It bothered me and I figured I had to get the money back in a hurry, because there's talk in St. Louis that the fur trade is done."

Les was aware of the blood running

down his arm from the slash made by Fabin's knife, but he didn't think it was serious. He kept his eyes on Garland and he said, "You figured if you could get prime plews at half what Emmett paid, you could make a killing and get the money back. Is that it?"

"That's what I had in mind, all right."

"And Fabin," Les asked. "How did he figure into it?"

For a moment Grover closed his eyes, wincing. Then he looked at Les once more. "When you fellas wouldn't sell, I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to back down, so I talked to Fabin, told him to offer you more than I did. Stealing them was his idea, and when he told me what he'd done, I didn't want any part of it."

Beaver Jones had come up behind Les and some of the others stood at a distance. Les looked into Arlene's troubled eyes and then spoke to Grover. "We'd better get you inside and patch you up."

Blood still seeped between Grover's fingers and he had his teeth set hard against the pain. He looked at his wife, reached out and found her hand. He said, "She's a good girl, Widman. But I wasn't the man for her."

There was a mist in Arlene's eyes.

Grover coughed once, then his head dropped forward and Les didn't need to look closer to know he was dead.

* * *

Emmett Garland took it better than Les expected. He had them help him over to the window, so he could look out, and he said huskily, "I wish I could have been there when he set that cannon off. It must have been something. Grover made some mistakes, all right, but I figure he kind of paid for them today."

The factor turned around and looked at Arlene, then at Les. "I'm going to get well," he said. "The fur trade is shot, but I hear that things are booming along the trail to Santa Fe. I could use a partner, Les. What do you say?"

Les Widman couldn't say anything right then. He could feel the girl's eyes on him and he was thinking that everything would work out all right. History was being written along the Santa Fe trail and he guessed there was room out there for the three of them.

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HOLE-CARD for the DAMNED

By James Shaffer

THEY were building the gallows by lantern light because the suddenly-ordered hanging was set for sunrise. The lantern light filtered through the barred windows of his cell and threw shadows on the wall. Dancing, shifting shadows. Crazy. Crazy like the luck Link Bolton had since he'd first tangled with the Jenner brothers four months ago.

Crazy like the justice he'd gotten at his trial. "Justice under law," the sheriff had called it. Link smiled bitterly. There would be justice before this thing was over, but it might be different from the kind the sheriff talked about.

Link Bolton was innocent, but he'd hang at dawn . . . unless, before sun-rise, he turned his lonely, iron-barred cell into a murder-trap!

A little thing had started the trouble. One night he'd danced with Rafe Jenner's girl. Rafe didn't care anything about the girl and neither did he. But Rafe was half drunk and here was somebody to browbeat. Somebody to snarl at; so as to show off the growing power of the Jenners in this neck of the woods. To show what a big man Rafe Jenner was getting to be.

Only Link Bolton was a stranger in Big Springs, and he hadn't been impressed by Rafe's whiskey-primed talk. He'd told Rafe where to go, and had offered to show him the way, and even get him started with a swift kick in the pants.

Rafe made big fight talk. Tore his shirt off, flexed his big muscles and invited Link outside. Link was willing but just then Hack Jenner stepped in. Hack was the cool, calculating one of the Jenner brothers. He figured Rafe would take a beating if he tried to mix it with Link. Especially in the shape Rafe was in. Looking back sat it now, Link saw where it didn't fit Hack's plans for Rafe Jenner to be beat up in front of a crowd.

A man loses prestige when he takes a licking. And Hack Jenner was busy building up the Jenner prestige in this country. He didn't want it knocked silly by Bolton's big fists. So Hack took his drunken brother home and Link figured that was the end of it. But it wasn't.

It might have been if he'd drifted on out of the country. But he hadn't. A chance to buy a little ranch presented itself and he took it. The Jenners didn't like that. Here was a man still walking around town who'd cussed Rafe out. Dared him to fight and had the satisfaction of seeing a Jenner back away from the challenge. The Jenners didn't like it, and they showed it every chance they got. . . .

Bolton's reverie was broken by the slam of the front door of the sheriff's office. He cocked an ear, listening; trying to identify the people who'd entered by the sound of their voices. And when he did, he swore softly and ground his cigarette out on the floor. He'd hoped to have some peace tonight. At least until later. . . .

The door leading from the sheriff's office to the jail corridor was jerked open and two men came down the bare hall. Link gazed fixedly at the barred window as the two men stopped at his cell.

"Jes' wanted to see how you were, Bolton." Grigg Dowdy's voice was thick with whiskey. "Wanted to make sure you're all right for the party the first thing in the morning."

Link didn't answer, made no move to show that he'd heard. He was lying on his bunk in the dark, head toward the cell door, staring at the barred window. He stayed relaxed, though it was hard to do after hearing Dowdy's voice.

"Open up and hand it in, Grigg," Link told him impatiently

He wanted to get up and smack his fist in Grigg's fat, moonlike face. He wanted to wipe that sly, silly grin off Grigg's face with five hard knuckles of his right fist. But he didn't. He kept remembering that thing in his pocket. And thinking of it quieted his nerves and let him relax.

"He looks asleep to me." That voice belonged to Hack Jenner. Link wasn't surprised. Grigg and Hack were awfully thick these days. And why not? Wasn't it Grigg Dowdy who'd gotten on the witness stand and lied about the shooting? The kind of lie Hack Jenner wanted told?

Hack must have paid Grigg plenty. Plenty cash on the barrel head—and maybe a promise to throw his political weight in favor of Grigg at the next election.

"I tell you, he looks like he's asleep!" There was a note of anger and disbelief in Hack's voice, and Link smiled in the darkness. Smiled to know that it got on Hack's nerves to see a condemned man so easy and relaxed just a few hours before his hanging. Then the same irritation penetrated Grigg's whiskey-fogged brain.

"By hell, he better not be asleep!" Grigg grunted. "Imagine! Lying there sleeping just a few hours before his hanging! Tain't right! Hey you! Bolton! Wake up!"

He jerked his gun out and rattled its muzzle across the bars of Link's cell door. Link let him rattle it a couple of times, then rolled over and sat up on his bunk.

"You two want something special?" he asked quietly.

"Just wanted to make sure you was all right," Grigg said.

"I was all right," Link told him, "till you two come in here and stunk up the place. You both stink. I can actually smell that yellow, lying streak down your backs. Stinks pretty rotten."

That made Grigg mad, and he spat a stream of profanity at Link. No condemned killer could talk to him that way. If Link didn't shut his damned mouth he'd open that cell door and beat him half to death.

BUT Hank Jenner just laughed. Hack was getting what he wanted out of this deal, and being cussed out by a man already as good as dead didn't worry him.

"Make you feel any better to spout off like that, Bolton?" he jeered. "If it does, let's hear some more. Nothing you say will worry me, because in just a few hours I'm going to have the pleasure of watching you kick your life away."

Link felt his anger rising. Then he thought of the thing in his pocket and stifled his anger. He was able to chuckle softly and stretch out on the bunk again, hands under his head.

"You'll get a big kick out of watching me hang, won't you, Hack?" He kept his tone of voice matter-of-fact. Just like discussing the weather. "Well, I'll try to put on a good show for you. You paid enough for it. How much did Grigg charge you to swear to that lie?"

He heard Jenner's quick intake of breath. But Hack wasn't letting a condemned man get the best of him. When he spoke his voice was taunting.

"Ever see a man hang, Bolton? Quite a sight. His feet kick and squirm every which way. Looking for something solid to stand on. To take that pressure off his neck. But there ain't nothing solid under him. He stretches his toes down, trying to touch something, but there ain't nothing there."

"Like I said, I'll try to see that you git your money's worth—both of you."

"Listen you—shut up that kind of talk, savvy?" Grigg's voice was low and intense.

"What's the matter, Grigg?" Link taunted. "Am I getting on your nerves? That wasn't in the cards, was it? You

two come in here to watch me squirm. And I ain't delivering—"

The front door of the office slammed again, and Link breathed a sigh of relief. That would be old Sheriff Pat Baker, and he knew that with him around his period of torture was over. The men in the corridor acted like two kids caught in the jam pot as the old sheriff stalked back.

"What's going on here?" he demanded, his gray eyes half hidden by bushy brows, shifting from the two in the corridor to the man in the cell.

"Jes' looking in on the prisoner, Sheriff," Grigg said quickly, trying to sidle past him and get going. "Making sure he was all right."

"We'll be leaving," Hack Jenner put in quickly.

Link Bolton swung his feet over the edge of his bunk and sat up. "Why don't you two stick around?" he asked. "Mebbeso the sheriff'll join in with you in hoorawing me. He's probably good at hoorawing a condemned man. He's been to a lot of hangings."

"Jenner, get out of here!" The sheriff's voice had a hard crackle to it. "Get out and stay out till after—till after sunrise in the morning. If I ketch you back in my jail I'll lock you up for vagrancy!"

"Say, listen, you old coot—"

"Don't old coot me!" Baker's voice had a hard edge. "I know you and Dowdy are planning to team up come next election. But till I'm licked at the polls, I'm still sheriff, and I mean what I say, Jenner! You too, Grigg! You're relieved of your duties till morning."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Link called from the cell. "Condemned man always has a last request, ain't he, Sheriff?"

"That's the usual way," the sheriff admitted.

"Then I want a meal about midnight," Link said. "By midnight that danged hammering outside ought to be over, and I can enjoy a meal in peace. I want fried chicken and all the trimmings. And I want Grigg Dowdy to fetch it to me."

"I'll bring it myself," Baker grunted.

Link shook his head quickly. "Druther have Grigg bring it, Sheriff."

For a long moment, the old lawman stared at Link, and it was Link who dropped his eyes first. He had an uncomfortable feeling that the old lawdog could tell a lot by a man's eyes, and there was something Link didn't want him to know.

"Any special reason why you want Grigg to bring it?" There was a cool edge of suspicion in Baker's tired voice.

"Yeah, sure is," Link said. "Grigg lied on the witness stand—"

"Now listen here—!" Grigg Dowdy and Hack Jenner both spoke at once.

"Shut up!" Sheriff Baker growled. "Go on, Link."

"I want Grigg to see the man he lied to death, eat his last meal, that's all," Link finished.

"You can have your last meal," Baker said. "Understand, Link, that I'm not admitting that my deputy lied—but you can have your meal. Grigg, you heard him. After that hammering stops outside, you bring him a good meal. The best the Chink can cook. Till then—git out and stay sober."

THERE was silence in the jail for a long moment after Grigg and Hack left. The gnarled old lawman rolled a smoke, licked it shut and thumbed a match into flame. By its light, Link saw eyes peering at him under craggy eyebrows.

"Sorry about that," the lawman said, jerking his head toward the front door. "A man ought to have some peace on his last night."

"Don't let it worry you none, Sheriff." Link laughed. "I've gotten used to things, I've gotten used to a lot, since I found out about your justice under law."

The old lawman flushed. "Rub it in, Bolton. You got a right." He hesitated.

"I still have hopes of hearing from the governor about a stay of execution."

"More justice under law, huh, Sheriff?" Link's voice was bitter.

"You got a raw deal, Bolton. I don't blame you for being mad."

"Yeah," Link mused. "I remember your words, Sheriff. 'Give up peaceful like, Bolton,' you said, 'and you'll get a fair trial. If you killed Rafe Jenner in a fair fight, you got nothing to worry about. Self-defense ain't murder—and if you shot Rafe in self-defense, you'll go free'."

"A jury convicted you, Bolton. That's the law. A man has a trial before his peers. And your peers convicted you."

"Shore, I had a trial." Link laughed. "I had a fast trial, didn't I, Sheriff? Twenty-four hours after the shooting, I was on trial. Justice was in such a hurry it couldn't wait to find that witness. But somebody threw a scare into him and run him out of the country. And my trial couldn't wait to find him."

"I'm still trying to get a telegram through to the governor," Baker said.

"I ain't blaming you, Sheriff," Link told him. "Your job is to catch men, not try 'em. I'm just blaming the whole rotten system of justice under law. It works fine—till a man like Hack Jenner gets hold of it. Then he twists it around to suit himself. Jenner paid off a judge. In cash or future political help. I don't know which. And he bought himself a deputy. Between that judge and a lying deputy, I didn't have a chance. Yeah, that justice under law worked fine—for Jenner. This trial showed folks what a big man he is. A lot of them will hesitate to buck him, after this."

"Believe me, Bolton—your—your hanging in the morning ain't gonna close this case as far as I'm concerned. I'm still going to look for that Fleer."

Link laughed. "That's gonna do me a whole lot of good, ain't it, Sheriff?"

The sheriff stared at his boottoes. "No, it ain't," he said softly. "You'll be dead. And it looks like you'll die by a miscarriage of justice."

"Yeah," Link mused, thinking of that thing in his hip pocket. "A miscarriage of justice."

The sheriff stared at him a moment, then turned and walked up the corridor. But at the doorway he paused and turned back. "Bolton, you got a lousy deal. A rotten break. But don't give up hope. I know how to delay a hanging. And I'll use every trick I know to delay yours in the morning. Till I hear from the governor."

He shut the door softly and left Link staring at the ceiling—wondering.

GRADUALLY, the noise of the town died. Outside his window, the hammering stopped, and a more ominous sound penetrated his cell. A dull thudding sound. Like a heavy object being dropped from a height. After a while, even that stopped. Men muttered in low-voiced conversation; tools were dropped into a toolbox, and footsteps died away.

He thought of the scaffold out there, and his mind went back to all the trouble he'd had. That night at the dance had just started it. It started to snowball on him after he'd bought the ranch.

The Jenners didn't like him. They were headed for big things. Power, money, prestige. And he was a thorn in their flesh. He'd stood up to Rafe Jenner and made Rafe take it. And so the Jenners wanted him out of the country.

His ranch didn't border on theirs but they found ways to make trouble for him. They cut fences; they drove his cattle off and they made it hard for him to hire good men to work for him.

Fleer had been a drifter and Link had hired him on for a few days. He needed help bad. His calf crop was growing. The calves were starting to leave their

mammies and he still didn't have most of them branded. In a few weeks they'd quit following their mammies and then they'd become dogies. Unbranded calves —belonging to the first man that slapped a brand on them. Fleer agreed to help him for a few weeks.

He and Fleer had been hard at work when Rafe Jenner had ridden up. Link remembered the next few minutes. The ugly scene that had ended with the thunder of their guns and the never-to-be-forgotten picture of Rafe sliding out of his saddle.

The rest wasn't just a dream—it was a nightmare. Sending Fleer for the sheriff—Fleer's failure to return—and the arrival of Grigg Dowdy, Hack Jenner and two of Jenner's riders. The flat accusation of murder. And how he'd gotten away from them in a swirl of gunsmoke.

How he'd forted up inside his cabin, fighting them off and waiting till darkness to make his dash for freedom. Then the arrival of old Sheriff Pat Baker. How the oldster had walked right up to the cabin and talked through the bullet-shattered window. All about justice under the law, fair trial. Self-defense.

And then the trial—and Grigg Dowdy's bald face lie that he'd seen the whole thing from a distance. And how Link Bolton had shot Rafe Jenner without giving Rafe a chance. And Fleer still couldn't be found.

It all added up to the lousiest deal a man could get. During the trial, while he was sitting there listening to Grigg Dowdy lie his life away, Link was so mad he thought he'd cry.

He figured he would have cried in his cell that night; cried from sheer rage and shame—except for those incredibly lucky seconds in the sheriff's office. He could still hardly believe his luck.

The sheriff making him stand in one corner of the office while he emptied his pockets to make sure he wasn't carrying a weapon. A knife to stab somebody with or maybe a file to saw through the cell bars.

Link dumped his pockets and the sheriff spread the stuff out on the desk, pawing through it with his big, horny hand. For a couple of moments the sheriff's back was to Link. He had glanced down at the floor, blinking hard to fight back those tears of rage—and there it was. Evidently it had dropped off a cabinet and fell behind it some time before, because it was covered with dust.

Link's heart had almost stopped beating when he bent down to pick it up and shove it in his pocket. But Sheriff Baker hadn't turned. And since he'd just gotten through searching Link, he never thought to search him again....

He rolled restlessly on the bunk, relaxing every so often to listen for any kind of noise. But the town was quiet. He just barely could make out the sound of music from Hostetter's saloon down the block. But that was to be expected. There would be revelers there all night. Getting primed for the sunrise hanging....

Then a lone footfall sounded on the boardwalk near the jail. He whipped off the bunk, striding to the window. The breath gusted from his nostrils in a whistling sigh. It was Grigg Dowdy—carrying a tray. A stray puff of breeze brought the odor of fried chicken to his nose. His pulse began to pound.

Then he forced himself back to calmness. He went back to the bunk and lay down. And he could feel the thing pressing into his back. He wanted to laugh.

Justice under the law!

He was going to give Grigg justice all right—and then Hack Jenner, too. But it wasn't going to be the kind the law dealt out. This was going to be justice—Link Bolton brand! He remembered the sheriff's words about the governor, then shook his head impatiently. He'd tried

getting a fair shake from the law. Now he'd try it his way.

HE HEARD the front door open softly and Grigg swearing under his breath as he balanced the tray in his hands and kicked the door shut.

"That you, Grigg?"

"Who'd you think it was, Sandy Claus?" Grigg jeered, and then laughed at his own joke. "Maybe you was expecting Sandy Claus, huh? Bringing you a key, or maybe a sixgun, huh?"

"Or maybe just a little derringer—a thing a man could hide in his pocket."

"Huh? Yeah! Something like that. Haw!" He laughed and then swore in vexation. "Where's the fool lamp?"

"Here, I got a candle. That'll do," Link told him, striking a match. Grigg came down the corridor and Link stuck the candle on one of the crossbars of the cell door.

"Open up and hand it in, Grigg," Link told him impatiently.

Grigg jeered. "Think I'm a fool? I'm passing it through the little hole in the door. This is a fool idea—wasting good food on you. You won't have time to digest it."

"That big platter won't go through that little hole," Link protested.

"Then I'll hand it to you one chunk at a time. Here's a drumsti-i-"

"Look at it, Grigg—take a good look at it!" Link had the thing in his hand now, its bone handle cool under his palm. He was sighting right down its stubby little barrel—right at the spot between Grigg's eyes.

"Aw, naw-w-w-w—" Grigg's hurt tone was that of a person who's been tricked and who doesn't yet realize how dirty the trick is. He was holding the drumstick through the hole in the cell door. Link's free hand closed over his wrist in a crushing grip. He jerked the chubby little deputy up against the door. Grigg still held the tray for some crazy reason.

Link talked fast. "Set the tray down quiet-like, Grigg. Don't make no noise, you dirty son. That's right—easy like. Now reach in your hip pocket for the key to this cell—I know you carry one."

His words continued to pour out. He wanted to get the ticklish part of this thing over with before Grigg could get a grip on himself. The ticklish part being getting the cell door open. If Grigg ever came to his senses he'd realize that he could jerk free and fling himself backwards out of Link's line of fire.

But Grigg obeyed like a man living a nightmare. He dug a hand into his hip pocket and his lax fingers dragged out the key. Link grabbed it, shoved his hand through the bars and fitted it into the lock. He shook as though with the ague but he finally heard the tumblers fall and the door swung open.

He was free. Free! He wasn't going to hang. He was going to live! For a moment he was almost dizzy with those thoughts, then he stepped out into the corridor. His wariness came back. He jerked Grigg's gun from leather and shoved it under his waistband. He listened with bated breath for strange sounds. But everything was the same. The town was still quiet—except for Hostetter's. Grigg's lips were moving in a foolish way.

"That—that derringer," he babbled. "Took it offen a gambler...thought it was lost...."

Link chuckled. "It wasn't lost, Grigg. Just fell down behind that old cabinet. Just laid there, waiting for me to find it—so's I could dish out some of your own brand of justice."

"What're you—" Grigg didn't get any more out. It sounded like his throat just closed up on him.

Link prodded him with the derringer. "Git going," he rasped. "Out the back door. And quiet—you hear? One peep outta you and I'll bust your spine."

GRIGG was inclined to stumble, so Link grabbed him by the back of his neck and hurried him along. They eased out the back door of the jail building and hurried across the darkened back lot to the big building next door. The county courthouse.

The back door was locked, but it was a flimsy lock and broke when Link pried at it with Grigg's six-shooter. They moved down the long, dark hallway, across the floor of the courtroom and through a door beyond.

"The judge's office," Link chuckled. "Sorta poetic justice to kill you here, Grigg, but that ain't the reason I'm doing it. This room is the tightest in town. These thick walls ought to muffle a gunshot...."

"Bolton, you can't do that—"

Grigg's knees wobbled and his whole body shook. He reached out blindly and grabbed the judge's desk for support. Link chuckled. "Why not, Grigg?" He tried to put a jeering taunt in his voice, but it just stayed a husky whisper. "You were going to do it to me. You lied my life away on that witness chair."

"But—look—I'll give you the money Hack Jenner gave me! I mean I'll *tell* folks what I did—I mean—I *promise* to git you out of this, Link—

"Think I could take that promise, Grigg?" Link found he could jeer a little now. "Why the minute you got around other folks—that'd protect you—you'd start screaming for help. You'd swear you never told me no such thing. It'd be just like it was before—"

"Why, Link, I wouldn't do that—I mean—I *swear* I wouldn't—"

"Quit crawling!" Link's voice grated in his own ears. He lifted the derringer and put its muzzle squarely against Grigg's temple. "This is it, Grigg, dam—" Something made him choke off the curse before he made it. A queer feeling went over him as he stared at Grigg's chalk-like face. "All right, Grigg," he had to watch to keep the tremor out of his voice. "I—I reckon—I can let you say your prayers."

"Prayers? Oh yeah—prayers," Grigg seemed more dazed then ever. "Yeah, prayers—heck, Link—I don't know no prayers—"

"You're a liar—everybody knows at least one prayer. Git on with it—I ain't got all night. There's Hack Jenner—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, sure, Link!" Grigg was trying desperately to please him. He swallowed hard, and his eyes rolled upward, trying to see the gun at his temple. The whites of his eyes glared starkly in the darkness. "Start me off, Link—can't seem to remember the starting words—"

"Now I lay—"

"Oh, yeah, Now I lay me down to sleep —I—Uh—What's the next words—"

"I pray the Lord—"

"Yeah, yeah, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should duh-duh—" His voice broke off in a choking sound, and his shoulders heaved as dry sobs shook his frame.

Link swore under his breath. He jerked his thumb impatiently for the hammer of the derringer and then realized it was already cocked. All he had to do was press the trigger. He shoved its muzzle tighter against Grigg's head. The deputy stiffened at the feel of it—then his whole body went limp as he waited.

"Aw!" Link spat an oath. He jerked the derringer away from the man's head like it was burning his fingers. Then he ripped the heavy six-shooter out of his waistband and brought it smacking down on Grigg's head.

The deputy's breath whistled in and out of his mouth, then his whole body sagged. His knees hit the floor, then his elbows and then he was stretched out on the floor.

Link stared at him a minute, trying to work up his anger at the man. He drew

back his foot to kick him, then stopped.

"There's still Jenner," he said aloud. "Jenner's the man I'm after, anyhow. Yeah, by God, there's still Hack Jenner—"

HE WAS walking fast—almost running to get out of the office—away from the thing he'd almost done. He jerked the door open and stepped out into the big, dark empty courtroom. And something hard pressed into the small of his back.

"Freeze, Bolton!"

Sheriff Baker's voice was a chilling trickle of sound in his ears. The pressure of the gun in his back never relaxed, as he felt the sheriff's rough hand lift the sixgun from his waistband and jerk the derringer from his fingers.

"Now you can relax. I jest wanted to unfang you, Bolton," the lawman said. The pressure of the gun eased against his back, as the sheriff stepped away from him. The starch went out of Link then, and he felt a hot rage burning up inside him. He slouched over and slumped into the witness chair. The same chair from which Grigg Dowdy had lied Link's life away. He gripped the chair arms till his fingers ached.

"I shoulda killed him while I had the chance," he muttered. "I'd at least gotten him, and with luck I'd gotten Jenner, before you coulda stopped me. If I hadn't wasted so much time—hadn't been such a darn fool—"

"I guess it'll take a minute or two to sink in," Sheriff Baker told him. "But you played it right, Link. If you'd a' tried to shoot Grigg, I'd a' had to shoot you."

Link stared at him, the truth beginning to seep into his mind. "You knew all about this—you even knew about the gun—"

"Planted it myself."

Link floundered for something to say, then could only get out one word. "Why?"

Baker's craggy face broke into a smile; barely visible in the dim starlight that filtered in through the big windows.

"It's that justice I told you about, Link," the lawman said. "Justice is supposed to hold up a pair of scales—and a man is weighed in 'em. I seen Rafe Jenner tip them scales the way he wanted 'em to tip. I kinda figured a gun in your fist—well, it would give you a chance to tip 'em back the way that they ought to be."

"Suppose—suppose thing hadn't worked out the way you figured?"

"I figured? Why, I didn't know how things were gonna work out. That's what I wanted to find out. You see—a man is entitled to a trial—a fair and impartial trial. That's what you didn't get, Link. My deputy bribed—the judge against you—your star witness scared off—and the jury a heap impressed by Rafe Jenner's power in the county. Nope, that first trial was rigged."

He paused and rubbed a hand wearily over his face. From the judge's office there were sounds of Grigg Dowdy waking up.

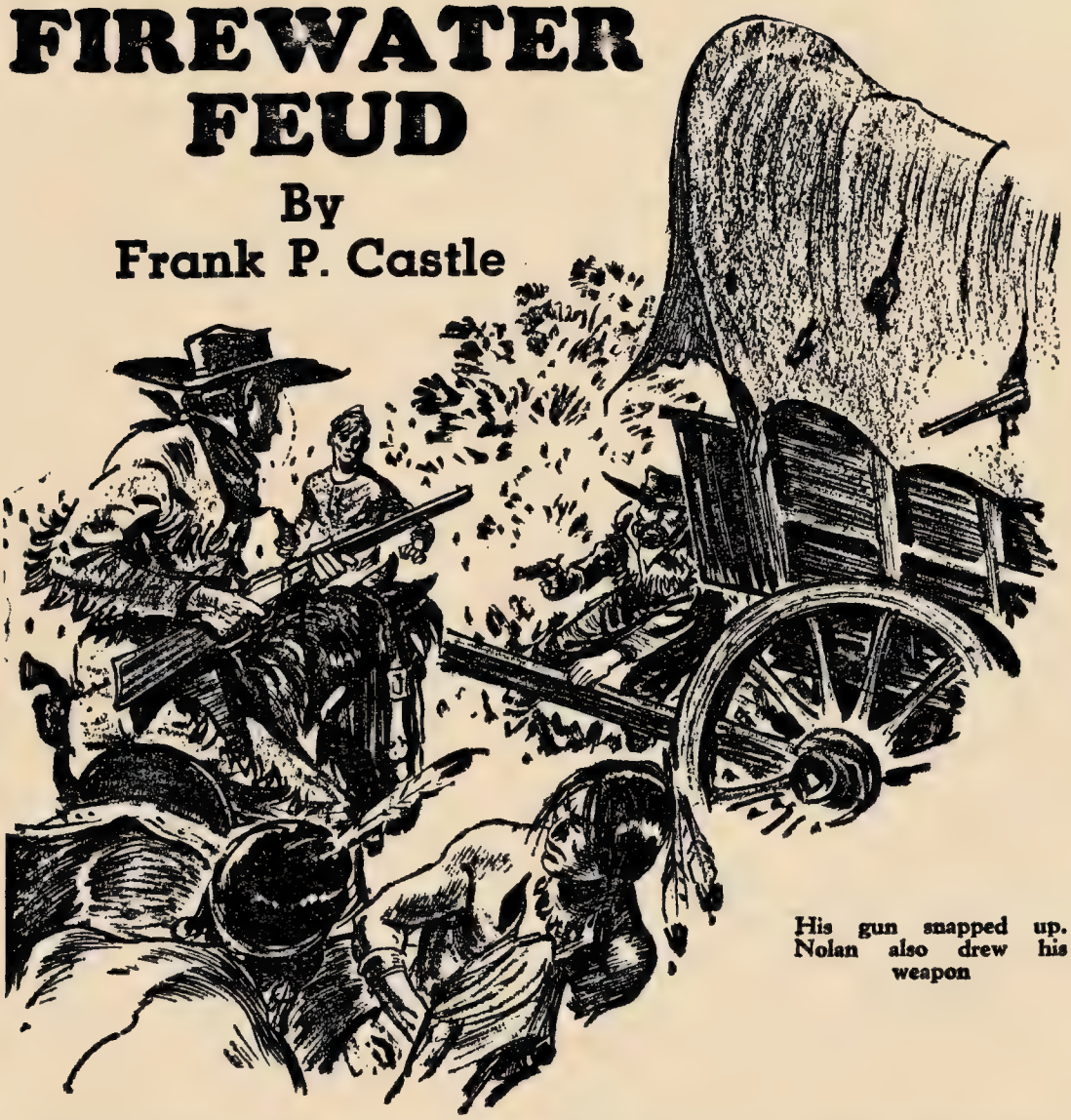
"You was due a fair trial. So I let you try yourself. If you could kill a defenseless man in cold blood...." He shrugged. "But at the last minute—when you told Grigg to say his prayers—I knew you wouldn't kill him. You'd brought in your own verdict. Not guilty."

He stood up. "Come on," he said matter-of-factly. "Grigg's awake. We'll git his confession in writing, then pick up Jenner."

"Tried myself, huh, Sheriff?" Bolton laughed. "Well, maybeso, but this was sure one trial where a hung jury would have damn' well been the wrong verdict—for me!"

FIREWATER FEUD

By Frank P. Castle



His gun snapped up. Nolan also drew his weapon

The band of greedy, blood-hungry renegades would fall easy prey to Trapper Fred Marsh, said those honest, harassed Pima Indians . . . For wasn't his medicine stronger than the soldiers at Fort Yuma—or the great white god in far-off Washington?

THERE were those along the Gila who claimed the Pimas had no souls, that Indians deserved no more consideration than one was obligated to show a rattlesnake. Fred Marsh didn't agree. At his trading post on the shallow desert river, four days' ride from its juncture with the Colorado, he was on the edge of Pima country. He had to live with them. But it was not this fact alone which made him deal fairly with the Pimas. His own inner convictions were also involved.

Walking into the blazing Arizona sunshine, he saw twelve Pimas hunkered on the hard-packed adobe earth, their impassive faces looking like carved mahogany masks and, as usual, giving no hint of their thoughts. Marsh turned to Juan Pinole, who served as interpreter and

handyman. Pinole paid for his keep.

"What is it this time, Juan?" he asked. "No graze for their ponies? Has a raiding party from the south run off their stock? Or is this just a visit for a long-winded palaver to wheedle tobacco out of me?"

Juan Pinole shook his head.

"None of these things, patron," he answered. "It is of a greater seriousness. The headmen from five villages are here. This is unusual. Not often do the Pimas work together. They are a very independent people. It is because of this, doubtless, that they are not warriors, as are the Apaches and the Yaquis—"

"I have noticed Pima habits before," Marsh interrupted. "What do they say to you?"

"That a bad thing is happening," Juan told him, without his usual protest that he couldn't understand the language very well. His mother had been a Pima woman and he didn't like to admit it. "Two white men are trading somewhere near them in the *Muerto Blanco.* They have whiskey, and the young men of the tribe are drunk and disorderly. There has been fighting among the villages. Several have been hurt, and one killed."

Fred grunted. This was news he didn't like. There was whiskey at his place, but he kept it padlocked in the cellar. He didn't use it for trading with Indians. Ten years west of Santa Fe, working and learning for the day when he would settle and build his own place, had taught him that whiskey and Indians formed a combination more explosive than any powder yet invented.

It pleased him, however, that the headmen had come to him. This showed they had listened and remembered what he had told them.

"The *Muerto Blanco,* eh. . . ." he said slowly.

The White Death. It was an alkali sink east and south of here, down toward the still hazily-defined border. He had crossed the *Muerto Blanco* once. He had no desire to do so again.

"Ask them why they do not take this news to the soldiers at Fort Yuma," he directed Juan Pinole.

One of the old men spat angrily before giving his answer.

"Who is to understand them, if they go to the soldiers?" Juan reported woodenly. "There are only Cocopahs at Fort Yuma, and they are no longer Indians, but lazy, drunken dogs who will rob a Pima and throw him in the river instead of telling the white men what he is trying to say. This old one says the soldiers do not care about his people, patron. Only you care, and only you can help. . . ."

Marsh sighed. A hell of a time for his help to be sought, he told himself wryly. Ed Garnett was due in from Santa Fe with ten wagons of trade goods, and he should be here to check every item against the manifests when the train arrived. The freighter, he felt, would rob him if he could. And if Juan Pinole was here alone, Garnett might browbeat the little fellow. However, Fred reminded himself, he was building for many years to come, and this meant a firm foundation was necessary. Even if those squatting before him, watching intently and awaiting his decision, were poor and shiftless by his standards—even if their friendship and trust were of no foreseeable value at the present time—he felt it was necessary to retain their good will. He was going to be here a long time, and so were they.

"Tell them I will ride to the *Muerto Blanco,*" he said to Juan Pinole. "I will start at once. And I will want two of their men to ride with me."

He went inside again. Grub for a week, he thought abstractedly, reaching down provisions from the shelves. The Henry rifle. His two Navy Colts. Plenty of caps. He'd ride his bayo stallion.

In an hour, he was ready to go, after

instructions to Margarita, his cook-housekeeper, and to Pancho, her husband, who looked after his stock. At the last, he drew Juan Pinole to one side.

"You are in charge here," he said. "Keep records of everything that happens, as the padres taught you in the San Xavier mission school at Tucson."

"Patron, you will find all in order when you return," Juan assured him.

"I hope so," Fred said. "Now, make presents of tobacco to all the headmen after I ride away."

HE STAYED near the Gila, riding east, intending to swing south only when he was near Salt River. The two who rode with him were mounted on wiry mesteno ponies, and he had to hold the bayo's pace down to accommodate them. They rode together, behind him. The first night out they made their own camp. When he offered them food they declined, indicating they had done their own foraging. A snared desert jack or ground squirrel in a cottonwood motte, Marsh thought, or possibly only a handful of roots and nuts. Their eating habits would make a white man snort disdainfully, but they had somehow managed to survive in the bleakest country under heaven. And they had, he knew, a fierce pride behind their blank faces.

Fred had not asked for their company because of a need for guides; he could have made this ride to the *Muerto Blanco* faster without them. It was his thought that the Pimas should have a hand, themselves, in clearing whiskey-traders out of their own country.

The second afternoon, still following the river, one of the Indians suddenly came up alongside him and grunted for attention, pointing toward low sandhills beyond the northern bank. Pulling up, Marsh presently made out what seemed to be a line of black dots moving slowly down a distant slope.

He gigged his horse across the shallow stream. An hour's hard riding brought the objects into clearer focus—ten high-bodied freight wagons with dirty, slanting tilts.

A rider left the string and came at a lope to intercept him. This was Ed Garnett, a squat, powerfully-muscled man whose face was hidden by a tangle of black whiskers. He hauled up his mount in a swirl of dust, spat tobacco juice and squinted narrowly at Fred.

"Reception committee, Marsh?" he asked. "If so, you come a long piece to say howdy. I figure at least three days to your place yet."

Fred relaxed a little. In three days he should have completed his chore and be on his way back. He could send the Pimas home, push himself and the bayo, and return to his place no more than two days following Garnett's arrival there. He didn't think this would give the man time enough to pull anything at Juan Pinole's expense—to steal goods belonging to Fred Marsh, but worth almost their full weight in gold to Garnett anywhere among the Colorado River settlements, or beyond in California.

"I've got some other business this way, Garnett," he said, and explained his mission. The squat man snorted, scratching his whiskers. "You got some damned funny notions, Marsh," he growled. "Where's the harm in trading a little popskull?"

"It's against the law," Fred reminded.

"Law!" Garnett jeered. "Between Mesilla and Yuma, there ain't any! By hell, if I was loose with a wagonload of whiskey among Indians I wouldn't pay much attention just because one lone jasper, like yourself, told me to haul out."

"They'll get invited with the muzzle of my Henry centered on them," Marsh said thinly. "This is my country, Garnett. Settlers are increasing along the Gila, and emigrant trains are beginning to push through. I'm thinking of them;

a whiskey-peddler in this corner of Arizona is something I won't tolerate."

"All right," Garnett said, shrugging. "Play white father to your mud-colored bug-eaters! You'll get paid off with a knife in your back." He scratched his whiskers again, eyes suddenly speculative. "You left that boy, Juan, to run your place, eh? Well, I'll turn everything over to him, and give my drivers a good rest till you get back. Take your time, Marsh. No need to hurry."

This, Fred thought, was more amiability than Garnett usually showed anybody. He didn't like the smooth words or the look in the man's eyes. But he had to accept them, and nod; this task of his had to be finished. He swung his mount away. Looking back, presently, he saw Garnett had waved up another man from the train to join him. They were conferring earnestly.

MARSH shaded his eyes against the blinding white glare of the *Muerto Blanco*. The Pimas were muttering uneasily behind him. They had been showing signs of reluctance since morning, as they swung south across a rocky plain where the creosote bush, the sage, and the stunted fields of Spanish bayonet and barrel cactus had gradually died out, until at last there was no vegetation at all. Ahead, in the vast sweep of the alkali sink, nothing grew and nothing moved.

Fred recalled that his one crossing of the *Muerto Blanco* had been made at this northern, narrow end. He had no idea how big it might be, or how far south it extended. Probably no one knew. The Indians thought of it as being cursed, and shunned it. For good reason, Fred thought grimly, recalling the uneasy feeling that had ridden with him on his previous venture into this place of silence and glaring white light which rimmed a man's eyes with red and left them sore for days afterward.

He swung his arm abruptly, plunged down a bank and pushed his bayo out across the alkali. It crunched with a brittle sound, and the stallion snorted, shaking its head. The mestenos ridden by the Pimas were fighting their hackamores. Fred halted, swinging the bayo, and saw, in widened eyes and shaking heads, that the Indians were as reluctant as their ponies. He pointed curtly, indicating they were to go ahead of him. They obeyed, still muttering.

He thought he knew approximately where the whiskey-traders must be. Most of the villages of the headmen who had visited him were west of the great sink; it was a country of cross-hatched canyons, barren, spiny hills and sentinel buttes—a wild land into which the Pimas had been pushed by their more warlike cousins, the Navajo and Apaches. If he had attempted to ride through it in a straight line, twice the time thus far expended would have been required.

The two white men could not be far into the *Muerto Blanco,* since Indians would not venture far into it for whiskey or anything else. And they must be fairly close to the villages of the five headmen. This made it probable they were somewhere in an area he had mentally drawn on a map in his head. Now he intended to cut at an angle toward this area, coming up on the two from the one direction where they would not anticipate trouble—from out of the sink itself.

The Pimas sent their ponies ahead at a fast shuffle. Alkali dust swirled in a cloud about his head. It burned his eyes, caked his forehead and crusted his brows. He had tied a handkerchief about his nose and mouth, but this was scant protection. The sun's heat was solid, scorching, and the reflected glare almost intolerable. He called a halt every hour, to share with the two ahead sparing swallows from his canteen, but this did little to soothe the rawness in his throat.

Hills rimmed the western skyline, presently, and he knew these lay in Pima country. Perhaps it would be necessary to night in this lonely waste, but sometime tomorrow morning he should reach the goal he had set for himself.

A sudden startled exclamation from in front brought his head up with a jerk. Both of the Pimas were off their mounts, kneeling to study something in the alkali. Spurring up beside them, Fred saw fresh, sharply cut hoofprints, left by a fast moving horse. They had come in from the north, at a sharper angle than the one he had been following, and traveling, as he was, southwest.

One of the whiskey-traders, he thought —and possibly the speed of the horse meant that he and the two Indians had been sighted. He might not achieve the surprise he had hoped for. But these prints had been left by a shod horse, indicating a white man had been riding it, and they must lead directly to the traders. He could move faster, with this track to guide him.

He nodded to the two, taking the lead again. They followed him willingly, now, since it was obvious they could get out of the sink quicker by going with him than by turning back. Pushing ahead swiftly, Marsh presently found the monotonous expanse of alkali broken by small islands lifted above the crust, humps of land up to several acres in size where sage and greasewood had taken root. The sink, he thought, had probably been the bottom of some shallow sea at one time, and these islands had been above the surface of the water. It was nearing sunset when he saw a big one rise from the gleaming plain of white ahead, and glimpsed smoke curling lazily into the evening sky above it. Circling to the south, he cut the tracks left by a wagon, and saw where it had been hauled up out of the alkali. The hoofprints of the shod horse also swung in here. A mile or so to the west the sink ended, and the broken country of the Pimas began. There were other tracks, left by mestenos, showing where the young men of the tribe had come out to trade for whiskey.

FRED stopped to consider his situation. The wagon and the traders were above him; he saw where a trail had been cut in a shelving bank. The third rider, who had come fast from the north, must be there also, and he wondered if the headmen had been mistaken in their count of the number of whites. Three of them would make his job a tough one.

They must have seen him coming for hours before his arrival, if the third one had alerted them, so that he would not have the advantage of surprise. And he knew they would not move out willingly. The Pimas lived in brush lodges and looked poorer than prairie dogs, but like all the other tribes in this country they had acquired quantities of silver ornaments, and men who would trade for them with whiskey wouldn't leave of their own volition until they had acquired every item of value the tribe possessed.

Fred squinted at the sun and felt again the urgent pressure of time. He beckoned to the two Indians nervously waiting behind him and started up the trail.

At its top, twenty feet above the alkali, he found a small clearing. The wagon was in the center of this, with its animals picketed in sparse graze beyond. The greasewood fire still smoked, but there was no sign of the traders. Marsh looked at the wagon's tilt and lifted his rifle, balancing it on his saddle-horn.

He had noted a slight stir ripple the tilt—and there was no wind blowing. He lifted a hail: "Hello, the camp! Show yourself!"

Brush crackled and a man stood up off to his right, beyond the horses. The creosote bush and sage provided thin cover to his waist; he had been hunkered

down, waiting, a weedy young fellow with straggling yellow stubble masking his face, wearing a red undershirt and butternut pants stuffed into knee boots. A wide belt about his middle supported a holstered gun. His hand was on its grip as he grinned, showing snaggled teeth, and nodded.

"Hello, yourself. Light down. Saw you coming, and was sort of cautious; a man can't be too careful in a place like this."

"You the boss here?" Fred interrupted coldly.

"Well, at least half the boss. I'm Nolan. Crist is my partner. We're just doing a little quiet trading—"

"Call him," Fred interrupted.

"Sure," the other said agreeably. "Crist! Come on out. We got a visitor."

A man came around the front of the wagon, stopping at its tongue—a heavy-set fellow wearing a fringed buckskin shirt blackened by much hard usage. A gold ring had been set in a pierced earlobe. He also touched a gun butt, looking truculently at Marsh.

"I can tell you about this visitor, Nolan," he growled. "He's got the notion everything between the Colorado and Apache Pass is his private backyard, and that he's got the sole right to say who can come and go in it and who can't."

Marsh looked at him hard and swung his mount a little with his knees. Ed Garnett must have known he would remember this man from the one time he had seen him, six months ago on the last occasion when a Garnett wagon train had reached the Gila. This was Garnett's assistant wagonboss, called out of the train and sent ahead of Marsh into the *Muerto Blanco* to find the whiskey traders and alert them. And his boldness in showing himself must mean confidence that a reception had been set up for Fred Marsh here guaranteeing he wouldn't ride away again.

Fred risked a quick glance at the wagon tilt. It was tattered and torn in a dozen places, providing ample loopholes for a qickly sighted gun. His Henry's muzzle shifted imperceptibly toward the spot where he had seen the canvas stir.

"Maybe I do hold such a notion, where sons who peddle whiskey to Indians are concerned," he said quietly, lifting boot out of stirrup on his left side. "I'll tell you just once. Hitch up your team, get out of this country and stay out. Start now."

"Brash talk," Nolan murmured. "You and those two scared lizard-eaters behind you aim to make us?"

"Too much talk!" Garnett's man growled. "Take him!"

His gun snapped up. Nolan also drew his weapon.

FRED pulled rifle trigger, slamming the Henry's solid weight of lead into the tilt. He dropped the rifle, then, twisting and falling free of the bayo. He heard a high, thin scream and had a hurried impression of a man pitching out of the rear of the wagon. He heard the explosions as both of the men facing him wasted their first shots. Rolling, swinging up the Colt on his right side, he tried for Nolan and was lucky, slamming the young fellow down in the brush, where he thrashed for a moment and then was silent.

Still rolling, with lead from Garnett's man spouting dust all around him, he snapped a shot and saw him stagger against the wagon tongue. The other's gun exploded wildly one more time as Marsh rose to a knee and coolly dropped him.

It had all happened with blurring split-second speed. Fred slowly stood up, a little shaken by his incredible luck. They had been too hurried, too eager to finish him. And, instead of relying on the sure ambush they had set up, all of them had wanted a bite at him.

He noted abstractedly that the Pimas

had disappeared and that the bayo, unused to gunfire, had bolted down the trail. Walking around to the rear of the wagon, he looked at the man who had been hidden inside. This must be the other partner, Crist. Moving up to the front, he found that Garnett's man also would not cause him any more trouble. This left only the fellow in the brush, Nolan, to check on. Then he would mount one of the horses here and pick up the bayo again—

The brush rustled and powderflame lashed at him. Marsh felt a violent blow which numbed his right side. Down on his face in the dust, he rolled painfully over, dragged his left-side Colt from its holster, rested it on the wagon tongue, and emptied it into the brush.

There was no more action from Nolan. But Nolan had done enough, Marsh thought, feeling raw, fiery pain from his wound. He looked at the horses, picketed only a dozen yards distant, and pushed himself away from the wagon tongue. He sprawled in the dust and could not move again. There was too much shock and hurt in him. . . .

FRED had a hazy awareness of the night, and of its chill. Cursing the two Indians for running away and leaving him here, he tried, in his lucid moments, to inch toward the horses. Then a strange thing happened. The blackness was broken by a fire whose flames leaped high, shadowy figures surrounded him, and he was lifted carefully, while around him sounded the harsh, excited talk of the Pimas. He was lifted to the bayo's saddle again and they were all around him, moving at a fast walk across the last stretch of the *Muerto Blanco* into the wild country where the villages of the tribe were located.

In the gray dawn he found himself in a Pima brush lodge. Something steaming and aromatic was held to his lips; he drank, and his head cleared. A wizened ancient, who was apparently a shaman, clucked soothingly, studying his wound with carefully probing fingers. Fred managed to sit up and check for himself; he found the bullet had struck a pad of muscle just to the side of his armpit, had turned and emerged under the shoulder blade in back. A painful wound and one which would mean a useless right arm for several weeks. But it was not serious. He was thankful that he could breathe without the knifing pain which would mean a damaged lung.

Something which looked to him like a mess of turnip greens —boiled herbs, he thought—was thickly plastered in the bullet holes, both front and back. This was covered with wet clay. His arm was tightly bound across his chest.

He felt much better, standing with fair steadiness though there was still some weakness in him. He could listen when the headman came for a palaver and piece out an understanding from his knowledge of occasional words and the eloquent sign talk, of what was said. There was shame here, he was told, because of the two who had fled, returning fearfully to this village. Because of this, the headman had dared the possible wrath of the white traders, and had brought him help. But there was another reason as well, and Fred could not comprehend it until a finger pointing to the west suddenly made it all clear.

He knew about the workings of the brush telegraph, and how word could spread along it with unbelievable speed. The people here had heard of something which had happened at his post on the Gila. And, from more sign talk, he gathered it had been bad. Fred signaled grimly that he wished to ride at once.

The headman protested, indicating that Fred must have rest. Marsh shook his head, pushed roughly past him and out of the lodge. His bayo was being held nearby; he caught the reins out of a boy's hands and tried to mount. The stallion

snorted, wheeling, and he couldn't quite make it. Jostling, shouting Pimas crowded up around him. The headman barked an order, and he was lifted into saddle. A half dozen men caught up their ponies and joined him.

Fred tried to understand. The Pimas were quiet, peaceful people, but they were refusing to let him ride alone. When he returned to the Gila, they meant to side him. He saw a rider detach himself, at the headman's order, and lope off to the south. His mission was plain: he was riding to the other villages for additional help. Fred Marsh recalled Garnett's prophecy that he would gain only a knife in the back from trying to help these people. If he could stick his saddle, he would show the wagon boss just how far wrong his sly judgment had been. And, Fred told himself grimly, he was going to do this.

SHELTERED by cottonwoods and the high bank of the river where it curved, just above his place, Fred studied the situation, and decided it wasn't good. The twenty riders with him waited quietly.

His hurt side, still held in its clay cast, was stiff and sore from the two days of wild riding concluded here just before sunset. He had a vague memory of unending hours in the saddle, of the straight line the Pimas had unerringly followed, along trails known only to themselves. The ride had worn him down. He wasn't sure how much fight might be left in him.

Garnett's wagons were parked beyond the post—all save two, and these were being loaded by men who were working slowly. Tomorrow, Fred guessed, those wagons would head on west, for the rich trade along and beyond the Colorado. And Garnett would stay here, he thought, taking over what Fred Marsh had built.

At least a dozen men would be available to back Garnett in a fight. And all of them heavily armed, while there were only his weapons and a pair of old trade muskets on his side.

The headman who had pulled him out of the *Muerto Blanco* touched his arm.

"Tabac?" he murmured, a faint smile stirring his grave face.

Fred frowned, puzzled. Then the man's meaning hit him. If there was one thing common to all places like his in this country, it was Indians begging tobacco. Those with him here could ride on in, could cluster pleadingly about Garnett's men without their true purpose being suspected. He nodded forcefully, and the headman's smile broadened as he turned to the Pimas.

Fred watched tensely as they trailed out of the cottonwoods and moved toward the low, wide timber and adobe building which meant so much to him. He heard a shout and saw the men loading the two wagons stop to watch. Others poured from the store—among them Ed Garnett. He saw the Indians dismount and move up. Garnett said something angrily, with a jerk of his arm which plainly warned the Pimas away. They crowded even closer.

Marsh left his shelter, then, a fully-loaded Colt gripped in his left hand. He heard a gobbling yell, and began to run awkwardly. At the headman's signal, the others had jumped Garnett and his drivers. A dozen struggling groups kicked up dust in the yard. The Pimas were working to knock the whites down and pinion them.

A gun roared, and one of the Indians staggered out of the dust to spill on his face. Fred snapped a hasty shot, and saw the freighter who had pulled his weapon stagger and drop. He was close to the fight, now. A Garnett employee flailed his way free of three clawing Pimas, and whipped a gun from his belt. Before it could be leveled, Fred chopped the Colt's barrel at his head and slammed him flat.

He was winning, Fred thought ex-

ultantly, watching man after man among the whites knocked from his feet and pinned in the dust. Up against the ramada, he found himself without a target for his gun and paused there a moment, looking eagerly for Garnett.

"Turn around, Marsh, and take it in your belly!"

He twisted hurriedly, and saw the muzzle of a rifle swinging down to center on him from the darkened front door of his place. Behind it, Ed Garnett's eyes glinted hotly. Without a weapon, perhaps, at the beginning of the fight, he had backed inside to grab the rifle. Now he was set for the kill.

With the Pimas, he had made a good try, Fred thought grimly as he tried to turn fast and tilt his Colt up. But he couldn't move quickly enough, he knew with hard realism, to escape what Garnett had in store for him.

The rifle roared. Its charge went over his head. Marsh pulled trigger and saw the wagonboss come forward a step, to fall heavily. He blinked, trying to comprehend how Garnett could possibly have missed at such a distance. Then he saw the bruised and battered face of Juan Pinole as the little man came through the door, and it was clear. Juan had been inside; he had ruined Garnett's aim.

"Patron," Juan said, eyes downcast, "I have been beaten. Perhaps it was punishment. I lied to you. Not only was my mother a Pima, but my father also. Otherwise, I would not have known how to send word quickly to you of the evil here."

"Lying is a sin," Fred told him, repressing a smile. "But since I now see that to be a Pima is also to be a man, I am glad you have told me."

The fight was over. And these, Fred thought, watching with a surge of pride as the Pimas jerked Garnett's freighters to their feet and disarmed them, were men whom the unknowing said had neither souls nor honor nor the will to fight. The headman approached him, smiling again.

"Tabac?" he suggested.

Fred Marsh nodded emphatically. "Tobacco, yes—and anything else I have that you can use," he agreed. "Juan, get ready for business. I want every pony here loaded down until your kinsmen have to return to their villages at a slow walk!"

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Joel Candor, with the face of an innocent child and the soul of a devil, figured he'd side the hopeless scissor-bills . . . to win either a bullet in the back—or a lonely man's trail to hell. . . .

The boyish face vanished, to be replaced by a bitter mask devoid of mercy

FIRST TO DRAW —LAST TO DIE!

Gripping Western Novelette by **By Harry F. Olmsted**

Bobrick passed the signal

CHAPTER ONE

Badlands Buckaroo

JOEL CANDOR came out of the south, tall in the saddle, long of stirrup and dusty from long riding. He was a stern-faced young man who looked like he'd been born with bullhide chaps and spurs. The sun beat fiercely into the Nez Perces Valley, pulling sweat from Joel's pony and narrowing his own eyes to slits. Riding slowly, sparing his animal.

The puncheon-floored bridge across

Deep Creek echoed his coming into Grayling City and suddenly he was opening his eyes wide, taking in the flags that fluttered from the awnings and the bunting stretched across dusty Ogallala Street. Only then did Joel realize that this was the Fourth of July.

From afar came the tootling of a band and that explained the town's deserted look. Business was closed while folks celebrated. Joel, hungry, thirsty, planning upon relaxation in a barber's chair, grinned as his mind went back to boyhood days, far away. The carnival spirit of the Fourth. Homemade cannons and other noise machines. Pink lemonade, wrestling matches, races and patriotic oratory. Heaven for a barefoot boy who tagged the marchers in the G. A. R. parade. As if eager to reach the smoke pall where beef roasted on the fair grounds, Joel touched his pony with the spurs. It happened then. . . .

A belching volcano of noise and violence seemed to lift him and his Blazer pony. The outraged animal broke in two and Joel, caught with loosely-stirruped feet, lost his seat and joined the birds in an arcing fall. A second later, he was sitting in the dust and watching Blazer buck along the lines of racked rigs and saddlers.

Screams of laughter assailed his ears, coming from a direction where there had been nobody only a moment before. Through the settling pall, Joel saw the yelping boy scuttling between buildings, the flabbergasted girl on the walk, a gray little man stomping the walk and holding his sides as he indulged in unrestrained mirth. He found it difficult to maintain a check rein on his anger.

Very deliberately, Joel got up, cuffing dust from his shoulders and seat as he strode to confront the one who found his humiliation so amusing. "Pretty funny, wasn't it?" he asked frigidly.

"Funny?" The little man gasped for breath. "Dod-durndest, funniest thing ever I seen, mister. Whoops! Mighta broke your dad-gasted neck or a laig, which ain't funny in nobody's book. But when Button slung that Chinese firecracker an' dang nigh blowed your horse sky-high, I like to busted a gut. Reckon I'd uh laffed if it had meant my own sin-speckled hide . . ."

"Which it sure would, you mangy hyena," Joel snapped, red-faced, "if you was half a man 'stead of a glandered coffin freight. If you put that boy up to this—"

"Please!" The girl stepped forward, her beauty like a cooling breeze against the white heat of his mounting rage. "Pap Cuddy didn't put Button up to anything. A boy's bound to be a boy, especially on the Fourth. You must recall when you were a boy yourself. I'm very sorry and I'll go find Button and bring him back to apologize for what happened."

Joel looked at her, content for the moment not to answer. She was a sun-tanned, boyish personality, yet femininely lovely in her dust-gray *boughten* dress that fitted snugly at hip, waist and breast. Her ridiculously small hat perched on glossy black hair, dropping in a fall behind. She carried a striped parasol fetchingly.

Aware of his drawn-out scrutiny, she flushed and the ripe, red bow of her mouth flattened. Sensing the change, Joel grinned and his anger waned. "When a man's dumped like I was, ma'am, he forgets his boyhood. The youngster needn't apologize. And you needn't make excuses. I'm Joel Candor. When I slick up, I'd admire to squire you to the big show."

"Don't bother." She was civilly cool. "Dad will soon be starting home . . . but thanks anyway." She turned away along the walk, moved a few yards and looked back. Then she was hurrying on, leaving a subtle fragrance behind. Joel grinned

at the oldster. "Looking at her," he said, "was worth two spills like I took. Who is she?"

"Her? Alvy Pittman, mister. Nez Perces purtiest gal. Her pappy's the Horse Prairie Grange leader. Don't you get no gay ideas about her, my friend, or—"

Joel found amusement in the bantam's flashing eyes and jutting jaw. His white hair was as rebellious as his temper, his colorless eyes unflinching. A fighting fool. "Why not, Cuddy?" Joel asked. "I like her looks. When I see what I want, I don't dilly-dally. And another thing: I don't scare easy."

"Neither did he—or them that follered him." Pap Cuddy pointed grimly at a scaling sign.

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Joel was silent but curiosity showed in his eyes and the old man continued. "When I shipped here from Paso to set Abe's type, he was the only man in town with nerve to talk ag'in' the Elkhorn Mountain rustlers. They warned him, but he wouldn't quit. They busted in an' shot him to death. The Town Council bought out Abe's kinfolk an' I run the rag till Tom Atterbury bought it. He got his challengin' a desperator that had the town treed. We gave him a beautiful funeral. Then came Peter Naughton. They got him about six months ago."

Joel blinked. "Who killed him?" he asked, trying to make it careless.

"Accordin' to the coroner: parties unknown. But everybody knows Flagg Bobrick ordered it after Pete wrote that Flagg was *'the greediest menace ever to hit the Nez Perces'*. Some dod-durned coyote stepped in Pete's winder an' stabbed him without wakin' Pete's woman Nell. I'm lookin' after the plant till Nell can sell an' git along back to Texas."

JOEL eyed the vine-covered Naughton house down the street. "Thanks, Pap," he murmured and ambled down the walk. He caught and stabled his pony, borrowed the hostler's razor and looked like a different man when he hit the street again. He went into the Mustang Saloon, one of the few places open, less for a drink than for information.

The bartender, grousing because he couldn't attend the rodeo, drew Joel a beer. "Wish I had the choice of drinking here or at the grounds," he said enviously. "I got more'n half a notion to jerk off this apron and quit."

"Tomorrow you'd be sorry," Joel said. "Tell me . . . who's Flagg Bobrick?"

"Cripes," the man snorted. "Thought everybody knew he was Mister Nez Perces Valley. Chairman of the County Supervisors; President of the Livestock Board; owner of this saloon and Flag Ranch, including South Prairie and the Battlements south of Silver Bow Road. Owns half the bank, the general store an' the—"

"Reckon a man could get a job working for him?"

The barkeep eyed Joel's gun belt, shaking his head. "Reckon not. A man's gotta pack double to meet Flagg's tests."

"Gun riders? How-come he's hirin' them?"

"Range trouble. Homesteaders are fencin' Horse Prairie and threatenin' to slop over into the Longhorn. Bobrick's a one-fifth owner there through the Nez Perces Pool. The cowmen are talkin' up a war. I don't blame 'em, do you?"

"Blame?" All mildness quit Joel. "What does blame count in a range war? All the wrong ain't with the nesters if the cowmen begin hiring killers. Me, I'll look it over extra good before I go saying who I blame, and who not."

Morosely, he turned outside, clanking musically to the Fair Grounds, buying

a four-bit ticket and going in. In the assembled throng were cowmen and punchers from all over Elkton County. Farmers from Horse Prairie, the Camas country, Bitterroots and the Bannack. Blanketed Indians from the Salmon, the Blackfoot and the Silver Bow. A traveling carnival with its raucous barkers, its museum of freaks, shooting galleries; ring ball and pea-game swindles, fortune-tellers, popcorn, red lemonade and merry-go-round.

Joel passed along the lines, hearing and seeing little. His mind was far away probing ground quite unfertile for revelry. At the smoking pits, he was provided with a roasted beef sandwich and a cup of beer by a gushy female seemingly intent upon claiming him as her squire for the evening festivities at the Odd Fellows Hall, in town. He showed her the coldest face she had perhaps ever seen, took his lonely way across to the pony ride, where the shrill laughter of children was tonic for ears jaded by the calls of the barkers. And there, perhaps as he had hoped, he found Alva Pittman, watching her teen-age brother match his horsemanship with other lads of his age.

Joel came up behind her. "Hello," he said. "I told you I'd be over."

She turned. "Oh—you!" She looked him up and down, apparently pleased with the change in him. "You said you'd slick up, and you did. I'd hardly have recognized you as the same man. Having fun?"

He washed down the last bite of food with the dregs of his glass. "Meat's good, or maybe I was hungry. This isn't my idea of a good time; is it yours?" He admired the poise that tempered her interest, and found her no less lovely. He thought of the shadow they'd told him hung over these farmer people, and wondered. Nothing appeared outwardly to indicate that her mind was troubled, but shadows in her eyes spoke of everything being wrong. The black, still wisdom behind her lashes disturbed him.

She ran her eyes over the busy carnival and her lips parted. "Our lives are so quiet, so much the same, I enjoy this excitement. I'll hate to leave it."

"I thought maybe I could talk you into staying to the dance," he suggested. "It'll be the best thing on the program, I'm told."

"I—I'd like to," she said, and her eyes told him she meant it. "But dad: He's with the judge now. He'll want to get going soon as he's free. It's a long way and there's the chores—"

"I'll look after you and Button, and get you home early." And, when the suggestion seemed to bother her: "You're not afraid of me, Alva?"

"Not of you or any other man," she said slowly.

"Not even Flagg Bobrick?"

She hardened. "I'm sorry; I can't stay to the dance. Let's say no more about it."

"You're boss, Alva. When and where can I see you?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know."

"Can I come to your home in Horse Prairie? How do I get there?"

Even as he questioned her, a tall, bony-faced man stepped past him, taking Alva's arm in a cruel grip. "Where's Ab Pittman, miss? I can't find hide or hair—"

"Take your hands off!" she said coldly.

"Don't high horse me, gal. Bobrick sent me to find him. Where's he at?"

Joel said sharply, "You deaf, hairpin? The lady said hands off."

The man turned a hate-contorted face and Joel hit him, breaking his grip and following up with punches that sent him to the ground. After writhing a moment, the fellow rallied, stabbing for his gun.

THE promise of death rode the man's blazing glance, his snarling profanity and the rhythm of his draw. Nor was there in Joel any wish or hope to com-

promise it. The coals of savagery, fanned by his talk with Swearin' Pap Cuddy, burst into flame, drove his hand into a gun snatch faithfully practiced and held in close constraint.

As those two guns came flashing out, a woman screamed. Somewhere, like a flood-tide pulsing against a shore, men's voices protested as they raced from the line of fire. Two guns kicked up a detonating crash that swelled across the grounds and broke like a wave against the stands, the fence and the town buildings beyond.

The bony-faced man, propped on his left elbow, shuddered and cried out. Deep in the blood lust of the moment, he gritted his teeth and tried to bring his sagging gun up against Joel, who stood watching every move. The wounded man made a desperate and failing try, witnessed by half the people at the carnival. But he could not hold. His elbow let him down. He jerked twice and lay still. Joel put his back to the fence and stood with smoking gun in hand, watching for retaliation from others of Bobrick's men.

No evidence of retaliation broke the confusion of the Fair Grounds. The revelers' momentary panic gave way to awe in the face of death. The staccato clamor of the barkers fell away. Down at the end of the pony run, Button and other youths sat straight in their saddles. Activity ceased at all the booths along the row as men just stood and stared. Then, moving hurriedly, a man came and knelt beside the body. By the way he felt for a pulse, Joel knew he was a doctor. He was still a moment, then lifted whiskey-reddened eyes.

"This," he said, and his voice was grotesquely loud in the stillness, "is a case for the undertaker—and the sheriff."

"Take care of it." Joel holstered his weapon gingerly. "Whatever the expense, I'll settle for it. It ain't so much what he was, Doc, as who he served. His mother will mourn him but his boss will hire another gunman."

"I'd be sort of careful, young fella," the medico warned. "You'll be in danger every minute." His voice was held down and he turned away, hurrying. A few rods down the row he shouted, "Down here, Rasmussen," and waved back toward Joel.

A big, flat-footed man came shambling toward Joel with a reticence that would have been comical at any other time. He had a star on his thick chest and a gun belted awkwardly about his middle. Joel, discovering only then that Alva Pittman was not where she had stood moments before, that she was not in sight, knew that Sheriff Rasmussen was a farmer, and was wondering how such a man came to be an official in a place dominated by Flagg Bobrick, hated by all farmers.

The lawman paused before him, staring studiously at the corpse, blinking as somebody hollered, "Look out for yourself, Linus. He's fast and a killer!" In the man's big round eyes, Joel read trouble, worry, the shadows of a harassed spirit, but no fear. His voice was deep, like thunder against the far hills.

"What happened here? Kak Collins —is he dead?"

"Pretty dead, Sheriff."

"Why did you kill him?"

"Same old answer, Sheriff. He gave me no choice between killing him or being killed."

"You can prove it, of course? Self-defense, that is?"

"That's doubtful, Sheriff. Maybe twenty people saw it but because they're under the shadow of the outfit that hires gunnies like this, they probably won't talk."

THE hulking lawman licked his lips, plainly unhappy. Elected to the office a year before, because of an overconfident cattle crowd and an unexpectedly heavy farmer vote, Linus Rasmussen's ex-

istence since then had been a misery of inner conflict. His deep conviction that he should help the bronzed, inarticulate men who had put him in office warring with an ever growing fear of one who lost no opportunity to embarrass and harass him. This episode was but an extension of that struggle and he attacked it with the dogged courage of his old Norse heritage.

"The law demands that I put you in jail," he mumbled, "but I promise I'll get right back here and get the names of those who saw it. The shadow you speak of—"

"You can't put him in jail, Mister Rasmussen!" Button Pittman had ridden to the fence, was standing in the stirrups, red-faced and bitter-eyed. "It ain't right. All this feller did was to pertect my sister when Kak Collins grabbed her an' was shakin' her. I seen it, I did. This feller warned Collins, knocked him down an' plugged him when Kak drawed his gun. He done just right an' I'll lick anybody that says different."

The sheriff sighed, brushed a ham-like hand across his broad face. "All right, son; I'll accept that for now. Young man —" he scowled at Joel—"you better not leave town. I want you where I can get aholt of you. And when you can, drop into the office an' give me your name, where you're from, what you're doin' here and all such as that there."

He turned on his heel and shuffled away. And a laugh ran across the ranks of his listeners. In all truth, it was a weak exhibition, perhaps the weakest ever seen in Grayling City. Four stone-faced men came for the body and lugged it away. Joel grinned at the mounted lad across the fence. "Thanks, Button. That pays off for dumping me into the dust, back yonder."

It was as if the youngster didn't hear him. His eyes were wide and bright with admiration. "Gosh!" he breathed. "Gosh! You sure got a lightning draw, mister. Wish I could learn to draw a gun like that. If I could, I'd glaum me a gun somewheres an' take to that ribby, willer-tailed, box-ankled son of a spavined jug-head name uh—"

"Whoa, Button! Suck in your wind. You've been listening to Old Pap."

"Yep." The boy snapped his fingers. "Can't that ol' mossyhorn swear nice? Boy! If I ever get so's I can swear like Pap, I'll—"

He cut off suddenly, starting and biting his lip as a heavy voice sheered through the rising sounds of renewing carnival spirit. "Button! Get outa that an' come to the wagon. You hear me?"

"Yes, Pop." The youth, at that age when worship of a hero seemed dreadful important, rose in the stirrups, stuck his hand across the fence. "Nice meetin' you, Mister—"

"Candor. Joel Candor, Button. Good to meet you too. Thanks again and expect me right soon, at your place on Horse Prairie." He found the boy's grip firm and vital.

"Gosh, that'll be fine, Joel. I'll sure be hopin'. Us fellers that are in Flagg Bobrick's black book, we gotta hang together. G'bye now."

He quit the pony, ducked under the fence and ran to join his father and Alva. And as they walked across lots toward their wagon, Button regaled his father excitedly but it was Alva who looked back.

People were moving from the carnival row up into the stands and a man with a megaphone was announcing the first events of the afternoon rodeo. Joel, whose name was well known in championship drawings among South Texas rodeo circles, felt a pang that he not only would not ride but couldn't even stay to witness the contests. As he had stood with Pap Cuddy, before the office of the *Gazette,* looking at the obscure cottage where the widow of Publisher Peter Naughton awaited a buyer so she could

return to her kinsmen in Texas, he had seen long lace curtains part and a pallid face appear and as quickly vanish. Small as was his appetite to confront the owner of that face, it was something he must lose no time in doing. He had ridden a long way for that.

HIS bootsteps echoing, Joel moved through the seemingly deserted town, opened the picket gate and rapped on the door half hidden by trailing morning-glory vines. It was plain that few if any callers had been here for a long time.

Within the house, a small dog yapped savagely, and continued to snarl and bark while Joel knocked repeatedly. No one came to the door and Joel was turning down the steps, convinced the widow had gone to the rodeo, when an icy voice spoke from the tangle of vines at the closed end of the porch. "What do you want?"

Joel, startled, whirled to the voice. As the face had before been framed by lace curtains, now it was framed by vines. And Joel had heard nothing to hint as to how it got there. An angular knife-blade face, with deeply-sunken eyes, a morosely down-curved mouth and unkempt hair, gray and stringy. A face so unlovely it seemed incredible it had once been the toast of a whole rangeland. One of those eyes, broody with the hot flame of bitterness, squinted along the barrel of a scattergun. "What do you want?" The voice was like the rasp of sandpaper.

"If that's your way," said Joel, with some heat, "it's no wonder you've been in trouble."

The gun wavered, then lowered. That terrible hawk-like glance clung to Joel's face, friendless and intolerant. Those thin lips parted. "You are a Candor," she stated tonelessly. "You're Brother Jared's boy Joel. I would know you anywhere. The curse of the Candors is on your face. Devils dance on your eyeballs. Like the rest of us, you're smart, ruthless and intent only upon having your way. So you've come—ha! Fine time to get here. Until the day he died, Peter Naughton kept saying, *They'll get my letter to him somehow and he'll come with an answer to these roughs.* And you . . . you come six weeks after they murdered him. Go out to Boothill, Joel. Maybe he'll have a word for you."

She moved out from the vines and he saw how shockingly neglected she was. Her dress looked like it hadn't been changed, day or night, since tragedy had widowed her. She looked underfed and her dog, barking weakly now, sounded half starved. Joel, pitying her, said, "Sorry I couldn't get word sooner, Aunt Nell. What can I do?"

"Do? The devil guides a Candor straight to hell. There's nothing here for you."

Joel, remembering how trouble dogged him, how he was magnetized to situations like that on the Fair Grounds, wondered if there was a Candor curse. He'd never heard of it. "Aunt Nell," he said, "you're not well. Have you any income at all?"

"Never you mind. I manage to get along."

"How? The *Gazette* ain't running. Uncle Pete wasn't one to leave much. You're not eating enough. If what little money I've got will help—"

"I want no Candor's money," she screamed. "It's cursed. Hoffat Cuddy fetches me a little, from small printing jobs. What he gives me will suffice for the present."

Joel chilled. God knows where he'd get money to support her, he thought, with everybody scared of Bobrick. "I worked awhile on the Marfa *Sentinel,* Aunt Nell. I'll be happy to start up the *Gazette* and run it till you can sell."

"The *Gazette's* dead and I wouldn't deal with a man fool enough to buy it."

Joel blinked. "Cuddy said you wanted to go back to Texas. I can let you have—"

"Texas? Without Peter? What's in Texas for me? Here I've got Peter and—" a sly look crept into her sunken eyes "—real soon, sooner than you think, I'm joining him, for better or worse, like I promised. I want no flowers, you understand? Shut the gate when you go out!"

She pressed back into the vines till he could see only fiery eyes set in a thin and pallid face. What could he say to one crazy as a locoed cow critter? "I'll be around, Aunt Nell. If you decide I can help you, tell Pap Cuddy. He'll find me. And don't do anything foolish, will you?" He turned away, her cracked voice following him.

"Clear out of Grayling, you hear me? This is Gehenna and the Candor curse will destroy you. Quench the lust! Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord . . . mine."

He hurried away, pursued by her ranting. The visit, long dreaded and worse than he'd expected, left him low-spirited. He turned into the Mustang Saloon, ordered whiskey from the grieving bartender and was mooning over the drink, considering the stark tragedy in that vine-covered cottage, when Flagg Bobrick found him.

CHAPTER TWO

Texan's Don't Scare

BOBRICK came swaggering through the swing doors, two gunmen at his flanks. Coming out of the sun's glare, their vision was faulty and they were half way to the bar before one spotted Joel and croaked, "Cripes! That gunnie beefed Kak, Flagg!"

They halted, staring, then advanced stiffly, Bobrick leading, the others lagging and spreading out. So still was the saloon their breathing was audible, but they remained wordless and chill warnings sped along Joel's spine. Holding silent, he met Bobrick's brash stare. Surprised at the man's thirty years. All along he'd pictured an older man, but certainly no more dominant one.

Bobrick was solidly muscular, with slitted eyes, cropped mustache and dark slashes running from his nose to the creases under his cheekbones. He wore an expensive hat, clothes and leathers. His gun was tied. Black hair showed at his open shirt collar. "So you killed Kak Conners?" His voice was deeply resonant. "Why?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Me, Flagg Bobrick. You're familiar with the name, I suppose."

Joel smiled cynically. "I doubt, Bobrick, that any man's as bad as he boasts."

Bobrick unbuttoned his coat. His men fanned farther out, their faces wooden. "You saw Nell Naughton a spell ago. What was your business with her?"

"My business, Bobrick."

The great man scowled. "Look," he said, simulating long patience. "I've no appetite to kill a beardless kid. But I'm fed up and I sure will if you're here tomorrow. Get out of town! Clear out of the Nez Perces! Stay out!"

Devilishness worked in Joel and he recalled what Nell Naughton had said about the curse. He sneered. "What a store you must place on Kak Conners, Bobrick."

"Wrong again. Kak was stupid, blundering. You've saved me the trouble of rubbing him out. Now I've said enough . . . unless you show again in Grayling." He moved barward with his mates, his back to Joel as he poured from a private bottle.

Joel's face set in stubborn lines. He was thinking about Nell Naughton and what this man had done to her. He was thinking about pretty Alva Pittman and the farmers who had found their dream of peace riddled with the hell of greed and the threat of war. He was thinking,

too, of good men, untrained to fight, who must live a lie from fear of Bobrick's anger. How easy it would be to end this evil reign, now. Just speak the man's name; let him turn to look upon his ticket and then let him have it. Joel had no particular fear of Bobrick's two gunnies. The odds of surprise would be against them and—but the sorrowful bartender . . .

Joel caught the stare of the menial behind the bar. The fellow's face held a new bleakness and he was reaching beneath the counter. Knowing that his own thoughts had been mirrored on his face, Joel forced a grin, slapped two bits on the bar and walked out, his spurs chiming bravely. Behind him, the bartender was croaking: "I think that gunnie had half a mind to plug you in the back, Flagg, till he saw me watching him."

And Bobrick's laughter, full and mirthless. "Let your conscience be your guide, Texican, if you got any left. But don't let tomorrow's sun shine on you in the Nez Perces."

When Joel hit the street, high yells were coming from the crowd witnessing the first rodeo events, and again he felt the old tug, the call of excitement in his veins. He couldn't remember a time when it hadn't been with him. Recklessness, certain people had termed it, including a couple of sheriffs. Were all Candors tormented by it? Was that what Nell Naughton had mean by the "curse?"

Resisting the pull of the Fair Grounds show, Joel bent his steps again toward the office of the *Gazette,* with small hope of finding anybody there. But Swearing Pap Cuddy was there, bare to the waist and in a lather of sweat as he toiled at the press. He was tired and about at the end of his tether, but his eyes shone with the irrepressible lights of youth as he let Joel in.

"Come in, younker, come in!" he cried. "I was just about to take five minutes, an' down a slug uh whiskey that'd drownd a dod-durned Missouri mule. Nev' did like to drink alone. How's about wettin' yore whistle?"

"No, Pap. I just had one at the Mustang."

"I wouldn't drink in that stinkin' *chingadera* coop, Joel. Not if the' wasn't a drink to be had nowhere else. Know who it belongs to? That hip-sweenied, magpie-gutter *cabron* callin' hisself Flagg Bobrick!"

"Know it," muttered Joel studiously. "And if I knew what I do now, I wouldn't have drunk his or any other man's liquor. Booze and gunsmoke don't mix; you know that."

"Gunsmoke?" The grizzled old-timer choked and sputtered over his whiskey, peering at Joel quizzically. "I heard the news about you beefin' Kak Collins. Good work. Great! An' I reckon Flagg wouldn't let a deal like that ride, would he? Is that it? Has he got his killers out huntin' you?"

"He found me, Pap. He had his chance."

"What did he say? What did he do?"

"He played it easy and light, ordering me out of town."

"You better go, boy. There's voices cryin' from the grave that he ain't bluffin' none."

Joel was laughing at him. "You old fraud," he taunted. "It's no sale on that kind of hogwash. What you trying to do? Reserve Bobrick for yourself?"

"That," muttered Swearing Pap grimly, "is none of yore dod-gasted business, you nosey broomtailed son of a—"

JOEL shouldered him back playfully and warningly. "Whoa up, old man! Don't lay your tongue to me. Bobrick's no more my business than the fact that you're slinking around here, taking more off human stink lizards than any man was ever supposed to take, just in order that

you can make a few of their lousy dollars to give to a poor old gal with addled brains. How-come, Pap? Where do you come off in that gamble?"

"Well . . ." Pap Cuddy sulked, and his eyes were flighty. "Well . . . what the hell right you gotta ask them questions?"

"More right than anybody, Pap. Nell Naughton's my aunt."

Pap sighed, straightened and flashed a smile. "You was a hell of a long time comin' out with it, son. Why, I dunno. I knowed it the minute I looked at you. Candor is wrote all over you, ever' inch. You're the spittin' image of your paw, the way he looked when I first saw him."

Joel nodded. "First word I heard you speak, Pap, I knew you were from Texas. And more at home with cows than with a press. So you knew my dad?"

"Yeah, an' hated his guts. But two things I had to admire in him: one was that nothin' on this earth or beyond could scare him. An' another was that he had something I couldn't match when it come to interestin' your mother. Both yore folks is dead, eh, Joel?"

"Guns," muttered Joel. "Dad got to be a ranger captain, dyin' in a Del Rio saloon with the four head men of a bloody border-hoppin' gang layin' dead beside him. My mother, who never stopped worshipping him despite never being able to depend on him or his support, just pined to death after getting the news. I—I guess I wasn't much of a help to her."

"Jared Candor was a reckless one, Joel. Temper like blastin' powder an' never would take nothing offa nobody. So he became a ranger? Looks like you, inheritin' all his hellaciousness, would have joined the force."

"Nothing would have made me happier, Pap, but the idea came too late."

"You got on their list of fugitives, eh? Well, if you stayed in this country an' stood with the law. . . ."

"Only one thing could keep me here, Pap. That's that there Pittman girl."

"Alvy? I know that gal, son. It might be the best thing for both of you, the very best thing. He'p me with this run an' I'll go out there with you." He moved back to the hand wheel of the press.

Joel moved with him. "You don't need to go on my account, Pap. Nor you don't need to break your back puttin' out printing orders, to support Nell. I've got a thousand dollars I'll give you to look after her. It's my job to support her, not yours."

Pap looked guilty. "What you tryin' to do; sentence me to a rockin' chair? I make a little, more to keep busy than anything else, an' what I don't need to eat on, I . . . oh, it's chicken one day an' feathers the next. But the light gets more shadowed ever' day an 'nobody seems willing to pull up the shades, so . . ."

HE PICKED up one of the sheets he'd been running through, handed it over. Joel scanned it, his breath leaping to quickened tempo, his lips pursing grimly. Here, under banner headlines, the little old journeyman printer had written a damning indictment of Flagg Bobrick. Each a separate story, he recited the mystery killings that had terrorized a range and, by deduction, laid them at Bobrick's door. He detailed the steals that, piled one upon the other, had been the ladder that elevated Bobrick to his present dominance. In a black-ruled box in the center of the sheet he divulged the man's real name—Hellcat Sheedy, supposedly dead leader of thieves, killers and renegades operating ten years before in the Big Bend of Texas, under the name of the Hellcats. A half dozen rangers had been their tally before soldiers from Fort Davis ran them out.

"Is this all true, Pap?"

Pap grinned. "Oh, I mebby stretched 'er a few points, but mostly it's the real McCoy."

"It's your death sentence, you know that?"

The old-timer grinned. "Nell would have missed me up to a couple weeks ago, but no more. She thinks I'm a scalawag brother of hers that disgraced his folks twenty-five year ago by gettin' hisself hung. Imagine."

"So-o-o-o, that's why you're doing it? To fetch Bobrick to you? That's right, ain't it?"

"This paper," Pap gritted, "allus went at Bobrick left-handed, so to speak. That way he could send a hired killer. Public opinion will force him here to heel his own tiantlers, or slink out of the valley. Either way is good. As sure as he shows here, Joel, I'll change his mind with a .45 slug halfway betwixt his scalp an' his mustache."

"Cutting it pretty fine there, old-timer. Suppose you lay off this for today and guide me to Horse Prairie. Tomorrow we'll finish, distribute the sheets and wait for the explosion. Bobrick'll have a double reason for chousing us. No?"

Pap shook his head. "No. I want Nez Perces folks to know Bobrick for the dod-durned coyote he is. They will when I hand papers to the Fair Grounds crowd. 'Twon't take me long. You go see Alvy, an' good luck, boy."

Knowing Pap's kind, Joel didn't argue. Stubborn, resentful of interference. It left two choices. Stick around and side Pap when hell broke over him. Or ride to Horse Prairie to proposition Alva. If she said "yes" he might rouse the farmers to open revolt against Bobrick's sway. If "no" he could return to Grayling with easy conscience and learn what made Bobrick tick so loud. "All right," he agreed. "But until I get back around midnight, don't you take chances, savvy?"

Pap promised, grinning as he shook hands. Moments later, Joel galloped his full-fed Blazer horse past the roaring rodeo stands, toward Horse Prairie. Mostly, he'd had what he fancied from life. Never had he wanted anything more than slender, straight-gazing Alva Pittman.

FOLLOWING the hostler's directions, Joel traveled the North Road and, five miles out, crossed Rockypoint Bridge onto Horse Prairie. East of the river there had been waving grass, bawling cattle and nary a fence or a light. But here fences bordered the road and separated dark-lying fields of stubble, newly-threshed; patches of corn and pumpkins and spuds. Lusty aroma of fresh-turned earth. Pigs squealing beyond a darkened house. Joel wondered what sort of a farmer he'd make. Would the curse let him be?

He passed houses, revealed only by barking dogs. No lights. Farmer folk slaves to fear, sleeping with one eye open. Yet they'd likely fight off a man who would help them, Joel thought cynically. Five miles past the bridge, he passed the Horse Prairie schoolhouse, lighted and housing a farmer's meeting. Two miles farther, he turned through a gate where the Pittmans coaxed fenced fields to take a motherly interest in rows of tall corn. An old dog came from the porch, his wagging tail disputing a half-heartedly barked warning. A windmill churned energetically. Fences were tight, buildings neat. Haystacks attested Abner Pittman's thrift and industry.

At Joel's knock, Alva called from inside. "Who's there?" half fearfully. And when Joel identified himself: "Dad's at the Grange meeting. Two miles back."

"I came to see you, Alva, not your dad. How about a gallop under a very interesting moon?"

Soft voices conferring. Then: "Sorry, Joel. Dad warned me to stay in till he returned. Anyway, I couldn't leave mother alone."

"Then can I come in?"

Alva's mother cried, "No indeed. We dare not admit strangers with conditions like they are. How do we know you're what you say? Or that you mean us no harm?"

"Is Button there, ma'am?"

"He's in bed, asleep. But I won't have him—"

"Ain't neither in bed." Despite his mother's protests, the boy opened the door, stood grinning, shaking hands in his nightgown. "Fine way to greet friends, pardner. Come inside." He dragged Joel into a room where Alva and her mother waited beside the hearth fire. "My pard, Joel, Maw. Y'oughta see him shoot. Killed a man, he did."

"Enoch!" reproved his mother. "Back to bed with you!"

"Aw, Maw, do I gotta? Can't I just—"

"Back to bed, young man." Her level glance speared Joel. "Now what was it?"

"I've come courting, Miz Pittman." Joel winked at Alva, who blushed.

"After I refused to dance with you and ran away without thanking you?"

"I've seen girls, Alva, but never loved one till I saw you. Maybe I've no right to ask, but would you marry me?"

His sincerity touched her. She turned so he couldn't see her face. Her mother gasped. "She will not. My lands, what sort of a man are you?"

"I try to be myself, Miz Pittman, never putting on an act."

"Well, no man barges in here and sweeps my little girl off her feet. Especially no—no killer." She stared with obvious repugnance at his belted gun. "You come into this peaceful home, your hands red with blood of a fellow human being. A murderer, influencing my daughter to become something as low as you are. Ridiculous!"

JOEL fiddlefooted. "That depends on the point of view, ma'am. I don't consider that I'm a murderer. I'll walk ten miles to keep out of a gun scrape but I won't back an inch from one who aims to crowd me into one. But I promise, ma'am, that I'll carry nothin' of the past into Alva's life. I aim to quit drifting, settle down on a piece of land and be a farmer. I'm banking big on Alva being able to teach me how to walk. Will you marry me, Alva?"

"You . . . you'll have to see my father," the girl said.

"And if he says yes, will you say the same?"

"Why the hurry?" Missus Pittman complained. "If you must court my girl, why, for goodness sake, can't you make it decently hasteless?"

"Because I've got to know, ma'am—tonight. When we get married . . . well, that's up to Alva, but knowing if she will or won't is a matter of life and death to me. It's the fork of the road. If she says yes, I go one way. If it's no, I go another."

"Rubbish and fiddlesticks. Anyway, Alva told the truth; you'll have to see Mister Pittman. No matter what I say or what Alva says, my husband will have the final word."

"He can't live Alva's life, ma'am. Well, I'll ride down and see him. Is that the best you can tell me, Alva?"

She turned to face him, her eyes misty and bright with the joy a wanted woman knows, yet clouded with fears stemming from knowledge of what Joel had shown himself in Grayling, and of what she knew of her father's temper. She laid her fingers on his arm and her voice was for him alone.

"I have dreamed of a man like you coming here, Joel. To break down the lawlessness that feeds our fears. To make the Nez Perces a decent place to live in. If . . . if dad says yes, you won't have long to wait. And remember, I know what you did for me had to be done. As water wears away stone, my arguments

will wear down the stern religious prejudice of my folks. Be patient."

"There's no patience in the man I'm up against, Alva, so I—"

"Flagg Bobrick?"

"The gentleman don't like me, Alva."

Horror came into her eyes. "Oh, Joel! Don't get in his way; please don't. He never works alone but always with hired gunmen. Keep away from Grayling, won't you? Maybe it's better if you leave the basin till—"

"Till what, Alva? Quitting the Nez Perces is what the Bobricks of this world thrive on. There's still men around here but it looks like most of the manhood has quit the basin for good. When I quit here, it'll be in the course of my business, not from being crowded out. Well, I'll be getting along so I won't miss your dad. Thank you both for hearing my proposition. G'night."

As he went out, he heard Missus Pittman snort. "A common killer. Daughter, I'm ashamed of you."

"Mother, please!" Joel grinned at the rebuke in Alva's tone. She was a real spunky one. No other kind could interest him. He didn't tarry to overhear the quarrel between the two women. His business was elsewhere and as he rode he could find little hope of quick success. If his first and only look at Abner Pittman was not faulty, the man was mule-eared stubborn and very much the bigot. But the try must be made. Alva's confession that his suit did not displease her gave him a lift. That girl fitted into his loneliness like a foot into a boot.

On the way to the schoolhouse, Joel passed a number of wagons, several riders and one buggy. Horse Prairie farmers returning from a day of recreation in town.

The meeting still held on in the lighted schoolhouse. And, as Joel dismounted and racked his animal, he could hear the acrimony splitting the farmers. Before entering, he paused to listen. It was like a Tower of Babel: everybody talking at once and no two pulling for the same solution to the common problem of defense against Bobrick's night-rider persecution.

TWICE, during the ride from the Pittman place, Joel had heard sounds like someone was behind him. That someone rode into the schoolyard, tied his pony and came snooping through deep shadow toward the schoolhouse. Joel flattened against the schoolhouse wall, gun leveled. He watched that shadowy figure circle, pause and dart to an unshaded window. As light revealed his identity, he froze, startled by Joel's snapped, "Button! Come here!"

The boy obeyed, murmuring his pleasure. "Sure glad I found you, pardner. I was scairt I'd miss you."

"What you doing here, Button? Doesn't your mother think you're in bed?"

"Yeah." He grinned. "Way females order men around is sickenin'. Why must a free gent like you lollygag around a gal? Alvy's better'n most, but—"

"Don't change the subject, Button. What you doing here?"

"I heard you say Bobrick's crowdin' you, so I come to help you." He fumbled at his waistband. Joel snatched the gun anchored there. Button said, "It's dad's. I took it from his drawer. A man's gotta be heeled when he goes hookin' trouble."

"You stole it!" Joel's stare was withering. "Lowered yourself to Bobrick's level. Condemned your dad to death. Don't laugh. Suppose he's jumped by Bobrick's raiders. He hunts his gun, can't find it. He and your mother die because you stole their right to live."

"But pard," protested the unhappy boy. "I was only thinkin' of Bobrick—"

"You're giving your dad that gun—now." Despite Button's struggles, Joel dragged him inside, interrupting a speech.

Dour, heavy-voiced Abner Pittman was saying, " . . . so we bear our cross, patient with those who abuse us. Setting an example as we lead them toward peace. Our violence serves only to rouse the beast in them—" He whirled as the door opened. "Enoch!" he cried. "What does this mean?"

Joel handed him the pistol. "I think Button has something to say, mister."

"I figgered my pardner, Joel Candor, was in danger," broke in Button, glancing nervously at the two score brown, ragged men filling the desk-seats. "So I borrowed your gun, Dad, saddled Smoky and rode to help Joel. He says I done wrong. I'm sorry."

Taking the gun seemed not to affect Pittman. Nor did the confession. Engulfed in his native intolerance, he said sadly, "I never thought a son of mine would side a killer and call him pardner. You get home and to bed, Enoch, fast as Smoky can travel. If you ever mention this man again, I'll thrash you. Gentlemen, I'm ashamed."

The picture of outraged piety, he watched his boy walk dejectedly out. And when Joel didn't follow, the man scowled. "Candor, we're holding a meeting. You hinder us. Please leave and let my son alone, you understand?"

"One question," Joel said. "If hope becomes fact, I shall settle here, take land and farm it. In that case, I'd admire to join your Grange, making your problems mine."

"God forbid!" Pittman snapped. "What hope you talking about?"

"The hope that my love for Alva can mean marriage. She insists I ask you."

"Marry my daughter?" The idea stunned the granger. "Are you crazy?"

"That might solve things, Abner," someone shouted. "Fight fire with fire."

Pittman flinched. "My seed falls on barren ground," he cried. "Go ahead, gentlemen. Marry your daughters to this killer. Bribe him with flesh to fight a bloody war. But first accept my resignation. I wash my hands of the whole ugly business."

When the chorus of protests waned, Joel said, "One more question, Mister Pittman. If I settle down and prove I'm for peace, not war, will you give Alva and me your blessing?"

"Not a ghost of a chance, Candor. No, a thousand times no. I'd rather see her in her coffin."

Joel turned to steel and flame. "That's plenty, Mister Pittman. I guess I was just day-dreaming, indulging in the stupid hope that a man can outrun his shadow. Please forgive the interruption. I bid you good-night—and peace."

He went out, laughing.

CHAPTER THREE

The Past Closes in

JOEL found Button standing beside Blazer, crying softly. "I . . . I want to say g'bye, pardner," he choked. "I dassent cross Dad till I'm ready to pull out. But you say the word an' I'll side you to the last trigger tug."

"Thanks, Button." Joel squeezed the small hand. "Some day maybe I'll need help worse than I do now. Then maybe you can come with me. You go home now and mind your folks. Go to school and learn. And, listen. Stick that gun back where you got it and, God helping you, never touch another as long as you live. Now ride home, before your dad finds you out here."

The boy clung to him. "Will I—I see you any more?"

"I sure hope so, Button."

As if satisfied, the boy forked his plowhorse and lumbered away. Joel stood there listening to the receding hoofbeats, heartsick, the only decent dream he'd ever had hopelessly shattered. He knew now why

he should not have dreamed that dream. He was like a man behind stout bars, held helpless in an Oregon Boot. Just as firmly, he was chained to his past, without the hope of pardon, parole or reprieve.

Sighing, he rose to Blazer's back and cantered slowly back toward Grayling. Savoring the sweep of Horse Prairie, the black bulk of the Battlements across the River, the royal purple pools of moonshade settling into the cups of the Elkhorns on his right. So, unhurried, embittered, fatalistic, he came to sleeping Grayling, stalled Blazer in the feed barn and walked down the alley to the *Gazette,* rapping on the rear door.

Unable to rouse Swearing Pap Cuddy, Joel tried the door. It opened to his hand and he went in. He stumbled over a chair, barking his shin. Swearing a little, he thumbed a match alight. The tiny beam fell athwart the gray visage of a man lying on the floor. It was Pap! Joel knew he was dead! Beside him, in two piles, were the newly-run and undistributed scandal sheets. Somebody had stabbed Pap in the neck, dumped the papers beside him and started a fire that, miraculously, had gone out.

The burned-down match seared Joel's fingers and went out. He didn't light another. Just sat there in the dark with Pap. Not grieving. Not hot with rage. Just nursing a dogged acceptance of his destiny. Every nerve alert too, because he knew the man who had done this murder would return, to see why the fire hadn't had its way.

The wait wasn't a long one. Joel heard the footfall outside, got out of his chair and stood against the wall near the door. Relaxed and chill, deadly as a rattlesnake. A hand grasped the doorknob. The door slowly swinging. A cautious voice: "Anybody home?" Echoes through the stillness. A black shape crossing the threshold, pausing, striking a match. A swart, long-armed man stood revealed, his voice reflecting annoyance. *"Nom de Dieu!* That damn fire she should burn . . . pouf. Funny."

"This is funnier," Joel gritted and, as the man whirled, put all he had behind the swinging gun barrel. It crunched sickeningly against the man's skull, dropping him like a shot beef. Joel stamped out the match and sat down in the dark to wait, staring through the open door at the cold stars. To them, this was old stuff. How many times had they looked down upon this fang law, this inhumanity of man toward man? This idea, persisting, cleared Joel's mind of disappointment, fear and doubt, calmed a wild resurgence of a restlessness he'd believed conquered.

JOEL lost track of time. Parades flashed across his mind. His mother, reading and re-reading the letter that broke her heart. A beardless kid stalking the surviving renegades who had slain Joel's ranger dad, killing each where he met him, thumbing his nose at the law. Discovery that one killing begets another, less from lust to kill again than that man is a hunter and destroyer of gun reps. Men shot down. Desperate rides, sacrificing everything to speed. Dodger-blazed trails across the Panhandle and the territories.

Come dawn, Joel scribbled a note, enclosed twenty dollars and planted it on Pap Cuddy, another of the cap-and-ball mossyhorns swiftly passing from the earth. The note read. . . .

Sheriff: This skunk killed Pap. Here's money to bury Pap. If you find me in the alley, with pockets inside-out, charge my funeral to Bobrick and take down the bounty on my skin. Love and kisses.

The Mescalero Kid.

Quitting this place of death, Joel moved slowly through the early light, turned through the Naughton gate. Just as be-

fore, when he stepped onto the porch, that cracked, menacing voice said, "Stop!" The order was punctuated by the cocking of twin shotgun hammers. "What do you want now?"

"I've got some bad news, Aunt Nell. Pap Cuddy's dead!"

"Oh, no!" It was the low cry of a soul in agony, the first human weakness she had shown him. "Who was it, Joel? How did it happen?"

"Do you need to ask?"

"No! I told Moffat he'd go like Pete. Maybe it's for the best."

"You'll be lonely, Aunt Nell. Let me help you. Your Texas kinfolks will—"

"Don't ever speak of that again, Joel Candor. Never."

"As you wish. I'll say good-bye now, Aunt Nell."

"Ride quickly from the sword, boy. Flee Babylon and the Lord's vengeance."

He left her chanting things senseless to him. The light was growing when he came from the *Gazette* with Pap's scare-sheets and the sun was rising when he finished delivering them to every building in Grayling. Tossing away those left over, so they'd blow along the street, Joel breakfasted at an early-opening lunch counter and came to the street again to find excited groups speculating upon Bobrick's probable payoff.

Silence fell when Joel appeared on the walk. Again his bootsteps were loud as men watched him. Smiling a dare to any Bobrick hireling, Joel moved slowly toward the stable. And, suddenly, men were in motion, quitting the walks. From behind, a low and deadly voice spoke Joel's name, insultingly. Joel pivoted, watching the advance of three men along the street axis. The three who'd braced him in the Mustang, moving with the same stiff-legged walk, in the same staggered formation.

Nonchalantly, Joel moved to the street center, stood relaxed, grinning like one greeting friends. "Wish to see me, Bobrick?"

As before, they paused a rod distant, Bobrick's bodyguards slightly behind and spread wide. And Joel remembered the look, seen before on the faces of men committed to gunsmoke. Bobrick scowled. "You stayed, Candor, to spread this slander, eh?"

"Yes." Joel nodded. "My friend, Pap Cuddy, ain't up to it this morning."

"You leave no doubt as to your intentions, Candor. I gave you your chance and you repay me with these printed lies." He paused, his ugly thoughts running ahead of his words. Joel knew then there was a spy among the grangers; how else could Bobrick know his name? While Joel studied this thought, the voice of Sheriff Rasmussen boomed.

"What's goin' on here, Bobrick? No gunplay, you hear me? I was elected to . . ."

As Joel's glance drifted to the lawman, Bobrick passed the signal. He and his gunnies slapped leather and before he seemed to give them his full attention, they saw him change. The boyish face vanished, to be replaced by a bitter mask devoid of mercy. Nostrils flaring like a wildling. Eyes white-hot gimlets. The mask of a killer.

Watchers, missing Joel's draw, suddenly found him ahead, firing. He centered the gunman on Bobrick's right, doubling and dumping him. The killer on Bobrick's left was the greater menace now and Joel swung to him, ignoring the slower Bobrick. The man lifted a raucous bawl and fell, beating the ground with his hands.

THE second shot had used up a clock tick and Joel braced against Bobrick's bullet, braced and fell away, triggering. He missed and knew he was done. Hurtling violently to earth in a life gamble, he didn't fire again so filled was he with

astonishment. Bobrick's knees were giving way. His face, one moment convulsed with blood lust, was only a bloody, buckshot-riddled stub the next.

Through explosive echoes, Joel heard Nell Naughton's wild chant: "Vengeance is mine saith the Lord!" His eyes searched and found her before the general store, gun stock still at her bony shoulder, eyes blazing. "Vengeance is mine . . .!"

In that moment of reprieve, Joel felt less thankful than satisfied. Peter Naughton was avenged. So was Pap Cuddy. Joel rolled, came up. Some man was hollering, "Flagg . . . holy cripes! Killed by that female Naughton lunatic!" A pistol rattled out four loads. Nell Naughton doubled, dropped the gun and lurched for the wall. Missing, she fell, never again to rise.

Spinning, Joel killed the man with the smoking pistol, fired twice at men who retaliated and hightailed for cover, reloading as he ran. Bullets plucking at his clothes and gun echoes soaring upward. Joel popped between buildings, hearing Sheriff Rasmussen boldly roaring for Joel's capture, organizing a swift volunteer manhunt. He thought, Brave talk for a rabbit backbone.

Swerving into the alley, Joel roared toward the stable. Not Joel, good looking, pleasantly smiling lover of kids and peace, but the Mescalero Kid, snarling and deadly dangerous. Ahead of him, a short stone's throw, a man rounded the corral fence, saw the running Kid, heard the roar of pursuit and went for his gun. Without breaking stride or speed, Joel shot him dead, almost in the rear portal of the stable. Knowing that the man's fall could be observed from inside the barn, and having no idea who might be inside, Joel slowed and approached the entrance cautiously.

As he cleared the jamb of the big doorway, Joel halted and stood there, immune to the death that roared into the alley. There, where his Blazer pony was stalled, stood Alva Pittman, white as a ghost, straight and calm as a candle flame. In that one second interlude, Joel knew she had relented and had made the early ride in to tell him so. Not knowing his whereabouts, she had posted herself beside his horse, knowing he would sooner or later find her there.

He knew too that she had seen a man die and knew that he, Joel, had slain him. More important, she was looking upon the revolting face of a stranger—the Mescalero Kid. She acted like her blood was congealed. Her eyes were frozen agates, condemning, denying. Her lips made the soundless words: "No, no, no!" And Joel knew she was forever beyond his reach.

Joel made no sound. He took one backward step and was out of her vision. Bullets wailed around him, one stinging his thigh like a roweling spur. Leaping into high motion, he raced long the side of the barn, gained a street almost deserted by the manhunting townsmen. Horses were racked here and he chose a leggy bay, forked it and roared along the street.

A few shots wheeled after him and he rode the stirrups, facing back, shaking out bullets and wild outlaw yells. One man, the disgruntled bartender of yesterday, ran to the center of the street and waved him on, a gesture of respect for one who has beaten a cold deck.

And so the Mescalero Kid came to Grayling, hung around briefly and vanished. He had made his bid for the peace that is not denied men with greater fault than his. But there is no peace for the gunswift, no burning homefire, no pretty wife to gladden the heart. Only the lonely camp, the hard ground and the cold moon shining down while coyotes mocked. His intentions, from the first, had been good. But his hand was too fast and his aim too true.

THE END

STEEL TRAIL DEADLINE

The crowd eyed the guns in the hands of the new arrivals

That signpost marked *Kansas-Colorado Line* was the far-off star upon which those gallant, reckless railroad builders set their eyes, hearts and souls. . . . But to reach it—they must lay track beyond Boothill!

By Harrison Colt

CHAPTER ONE

Push Steel for Madmen's Town!

CLINT McLane didn't wait until the General Burnside had finished backing into Pawnee City before jumping down from the cab. His boots hit the hard-frozen ground with an abruptness that jarred his spine and made him stumble forward a few quick steps. He regained his balance, straightened, and without a backward glance at O'Flaherty or his fireman, hurried away toward the center of town.

The quick-settling winter dusk wasn't far off as he walked quickly up the newly-constructed sidewalk of unpainted planks, passing between motley rows of quick-mushrooming structures. There were tents, shacks pieced together with scrap lumber; many had canvas roofs. The chill Kansas wind whined around the corners of the flimsy structures and the snapping of canvas sounded loudly at intervals, almost like pistol shots.

Clint turned into a large, three-story frame hotel. He made inquiries at the desk, then made his way upstairs to Room 205, and knocked. A voice bade him enter.

Major Halliday got up from a chair and moved forward, holding out his hand. He was an erect, silvery-haired man with square shoulders and blue eyes, oddly gentle and mild for a man with his military bearing. He looked tired as he said, smiling faintly, "Sorry to drag you away from the job, Clint. But there was a little matter that had to be taken care of. You know Senator Bagley?"

Clint glanced across the room at a large paunchy man in a checkered waistcoat, wearing a diamond on one stubby finger of his soft white hand. Bagley was seated on a chair beside the bed, studying a large map spread out across the counterpane. He looked up at the newcomer indifferently and nodded. There was malice mingled with the satisfaction in his small brown eyes.

Clint nodded, wondering again at his ability to scent trouble long before it arrived. From the moment he'd heard that the major wanted to see him at "end-of-track," there had been a feeling in his bones that some manner of setback awaited him here. Now, seeing Bagley, he was certain of the fact. He knew the stout man as a gambler and one of the more unsavory men elected in the state. In their only previous meeting, which had been brief and decidedly unfriendly he had taken a hearty dislike to the man, and nothing had occurred since to make him change his mind. "I've met the senator," he said dryly.

"That's right," Bagley boomed importantly. "I had a talk with McLane before. He didn't see the light then. I trust he will this time."

Major Halliday looked uncomfortable. Abruptly he asked, "How much would it delay us, Clint, if we were to swing south along the line of the original survey?"

McLane's lips tightened. "You mean so as to put the rails through Bagley City?"

Halliday nodded. "That's what I mean."

Clint directed an annoyed glance across the room at Bagley. He said, "Major, if we tried anything like that we'd be throwing away our last chance of reaching the state line by the twenty-sixth. Therefore, I'd advise against even considering it."

"You haven't answered my question," the major insisted. "How much of a delay would it mean?"

"Well, because of the nature of the country due west of Bagley City, it wouldn't be simply a matter of constructing an additional seven miles of track. The figure would be nearly double that, because we'd have to swing back north after hitting Bagley to keep to the flat prairie. How much time would that cost us? About a week, I'd say."

MAJOR HALLIDAY sighed. Some of the erectness seemed to have slipped from his shoulders and for the first time since Clint had known him he looked like an old man. "I had hoped it would be less. Well, I suppose it can't be helped. Clint, I want you to proceed by way of Bagley City."

Clint was too astonished to say anything for a moment. Then he warned, "You realize what this means, Major? We've got approximately fifty miles to go before we hit the state line. This is the first of December and the deadline is midnight of the twenty-sixth. That gives us exactly twenty-five days. Cut a week off that and you've got just eighteen days."

"I know," Halliday said gloomily. "I don't like it any better than you do. However, I've given Senator Bagley my word that the tracks will reach Bagley City, and I intend to stand by my promise."

Clint tried to keep the anger out of his voice. "Whatever you say, Major. It's

your road. I guess you can run it where you want to."

The stout man had risen from his chair. He stared across the room, tiny eyes fastened on Clint's face, a malicious, half-amused smirk on his corpulent features.

"Good!" he grunted. "Then everything is settled?"

Major Halliday nodded, avoiding Clint's eyes. "Yes, Senator," he said, in a voice not entirely free from bitterness, "everything is settled."

"This calls for a celebration," Senator Bagley announced. "Come downstairs, Major, and I'll buy you a drink. A toast to the new, rising metropolis of the plains—Bagley City!"

The silvery-haired man murmured a polite refusal, and Bagley exclaimed, "Oh, yes—I forgot, Major, that you aren't a drinking man. How about you, McLane?"

Clint declined, even though he felt he could use one handily right then. He stepped back and let the large man pass him and step out into the hall.

For a while after the stout man had gone, Halliday didn't speak. His face was sober and tight-lipped, and his hands were clenched so tightly the whiteness of his knuckles shown transparently through the skin. Clint sensed that if the major had been a cursing man, oaths would have been spilling from his lips at this moment.

"Clint," he said suddenly, "I know it's neither Christian nor charitable to feel toward any man as I feel toward Bagley. Perhaps I'm wrong. Perhaps there is a spark of good in him. But I must admit I fail to detect any evidence of it."

Clint fastened puzzled eyes on Halliday. "If that's the way you feel, why'd you submit to his demands?"

"You don't think I would have if there had been any other way, do you?" the major snapped. "Bagley had us where he wanted us and he knew it. You know how shaky our financial condition is at the moment. So far we've managed to keep going only by using every dollar of profit, every loan, every grant we could put our hands on. I've sunk my last dollar into the venture and so, unfortunately, have the friends I persuaded to back me. The one chance we have of emerging solvent and keeping eastern bankers from moving in and taking over what we've fought so hard for is to reach the state-line in time to receive that government grant of two million acres."

"I know that, Major. But where does Bagley come in?"

"The whole thing's quite simple. You know that in a number of instances, aid in the form of bonds was voted by various counties, payable at the time the road was built across the county lines. Without this aid, the project of extending the tracks westward across the state would have had to be abandoned. Now, in his capacity as a member of the state legislature, Bagley has been stirring up a fight over the issue, claiming that no county has the right to expend its citizens' money in such a manner, threatening to legislate against it."

"He'll never be able to get away with it, sir."

"Of course not. But he further threatens as a taxpayer to bring suit in the courts and secure an injunction forbidding any such further grants until the case is settled. That would be our ruin. We have less than ten miles to go to reach the Dowell county line, and we had been counting heavily on the bond issue voted us to give us enough money to carry us across the state line."

Clint nodded, frowning. "I see. If you had refused, Bagley would have tied you up in the courts and the road's last chance of reaching the state line would have been finished anyway?"

Halliday nodded, his eyes bitter. A gloomy silence settled across the room. McLane walked over to the bed and

frowned down at the map for a moment.

The major spoke suddenly. "What do you think, McLane? Is there a chance of our making the Colorado line in eighteen days—or are we beaten?"

Clint ran the horny palm of a big hand over the two-day-old stubble of black beard. Three miles of track a day! That was what it would take. And the best they had been able to do so far was around two miles a day! The task seemed hopeless. And yet. . . .

"I wouldn't like to say it was impossible, sir," he said finally. "But it would be a gamble. I'd need more men, money enough to offer double wages and bonuses for Sunday work."

"You'd work Sundays?" Halliday's eyes were troubled. "I don't like the sound of that."

"Without Sunday work there'd be no chance of our meeting the deadline," McLane pointed out.

Halladay sighed. "Well, in that case—I guess the Lord might forgive us, seeing what a hurry we're in. All right, Clint, you'll have more men and the money you need. That much I can promise you."

"Of course, there's one thing more: the weather," Clint warned. "Up to now we've been lucky. The real winter weather's been holding off. But that's something we can't count on much longer. Any day now one of those Kansas blizzards might hit us. That would slow work to a crawl and wipe out our last chance of completing the job on time."

"We'll have to risk that," the major said grimly. "I shall be praying to the Lord every night that He will hold the bad weather in abeyance."

The construction boss was on the point of taking his departure when his gaze returned once more to the map on the bed and a faint frown of speculation furrowed his brow. "Just one thing more, Major. What exactly did you promise Bagley? Just that our rails would come into Bagley City? That what you said?"

"Why, yes."

Clint continued to stare at the map. Finally a faint grin began to alter the grimness of his mouth. "Of course, Major, there may be a way out. . . ."

HALF an hour later Clint left the hotel, plodding through the murky, windswept darkness in the direction of the A. T. and W. tracks. In the feeble orange splashes of light spilling from the buildings on either side, he saw a surging, restless tide of men washing in and out of saloons and gambling houses. Snatches of bawdy song, rendered by some shrill-voiced female entertainer, drifted out to him.

He moved ahead, a faint grin lurking at the corners of his mouth. A man had to have at least a half dozens drinks of the kind of liquor served inside before he could appreciate a voice like that.

Clint paused as he came opposite the huge dancehall at the end of the street run by Handsome Jack Devers. He remembered suddenly that Yorke Adkins was in town and would likely be found at one of the gaming tables inside. Clint turned through the doors.

The large room boiled with humanity. Men clustered thickly about tables at the rear. The cries of the monte dealers was heard above the jangle of piano music and the stamp of boots on the plank flooring. Clint searched the crowd with careful eyes but saw no sign of his assistant.

He made his way across the room and shouldered into a place at the bar. Almost immediately one of the three bartenders spotted him and moved forward. "Evenin', Mr. McLane," he said respectfully. "Anythin' I c'n do fer yuh?"

"You see Adkins around here tonight, Ben?"

"Why yes, Mr. McLane. I saw him over by the monte layout a little while

ago. An' after that I saw him talkin' with the boss." He paused for a moment and stared over the heads of the crowd at the bar. "There's Handsome Jack now comin' out of the back room. Why don't you ask him?"

Clint followed his gaze and saw two men advancing from the hall's rear. Handsome Jack Devers, a lean, sharp-faced man, dressed with the meticulous attention to detail that had earned him his name. The second man was hard-faced, heavy-shouldered, and he trotted at his employer's heels like a faithful dog. There was a bulge under his wrinkled coat. Another gun was strapped about his middle in plain sight.

Clint moved to intercept. Surprise flickered briefly in the pale eyes of the dancehall proprietor. But next moment he was smiling cordially.

"You want to find Adkins? That's easy. He's sitting in a poker game in a private room. Jud, suppose you go back there and tell Yorke his boss is looking for him?"

His big companion nodded wordlessly and turned away.

"How about a drink while we're waiting, McLane?" Devers suggested. "Some of my private stuff."

Clint accompanied the dapper, black-coated man to the bar. A bartender filled their glasses from a bottle kept under the bar.

Devers held up his glass, a faint smile twisting his lips. "Here's to the A. T. and W.! May she never stop building 'til she hits the Pacific!—and may her builders continue to have as big a thirst as they've had in the past!"

Clint laughed. "I think even the major might be willing to drink to the first part of that." He lifted the glass to his lips and drained it, grateful for the sudden warmth that spread through his sturdy frame. It was pleasant to remember the raw bite of the wind, now that he was no longer out fighting against in it.

Handsome Jack Devers was eyeing him carefully. Clint thought he saw satisfaction lurking deep in the man's eyes. He licked his lips thoughtfully. "I hear there's been a change in the A. T. and W.'s plans," he said slowly. "That the road will go through Bagley City as had been thought earlier?"

Clint put down his glass suddenly and gave the other a quick look. "Where'd you hear that?" he demanded.

"Senator Bagley was in here a little while back. It's true, ain't it?"

Clint said, "Our tracks will hit Bagley City all right. But I never expected the news to get around so fast."

Devers grinned. "That's the way it goes around here. Half a minute before you've even thought about doing something, they're already talkin' about it."

Presently the heavy-shouldered man returned with Adkins. McLane's second-in-command was a tall, stiff-mannered young man who seldom smiled. His face was frozen into a harshly aloof expression and his eyes held no warmth. So far as Clint knew, he had no close personal friends. But he had one weakness: gambling. "I understand you're looking for me?" he said.

"That's right. I want you to hunt up Tim Dodd. Tell him I want to see him out at Cooney's Point. And I want you to get hold of all the men you can for the grading and scraping gangs. Wire east for more horses and breaking plows, too."

Adkins tightened his lips. "Just when I was having a little luck at poker, too," he remarked sourly. "Oh well—"

Clint turned and pushed out into the night. He tugged his sheepskin-lined coat up around his chin as he braved the chill gusts that whipped between frame shanties and tents. He climbed aboard the cab of the waiting General Burnside and soon the locomotive was chugging and snorting back up the track toward the work camp

at Cooney's Point. Both O'Flaherty and his fireman smelled strongly of cheap whiskey. Clint didn't blame them for fortifying themselves against the cold of the return trip.

TIM DODD, chief surveyor, showed up in camp next morning. There was a deep shadow of gloom across his dour, owlish features. "I know why you sent for me," the little man announced. "Back in Pawnee they can't seem to talk about anything else. Already some of the saloons and dancehalls are being torn down and the lumber and furnishings sent ahead to Bagley City by wagon. You wanted to see me about running a new survey? That right?"

"That's about it," Clint agreed.

Dodd sighed. "Well, I guess that means the finish for the A. T. and W. I sure feel sorry for the major. Imagine dreaming of something for most of your life and then—"

"Wait a minute, Tim. Aren't you in an awful hurry to count out the A. T. and W.? How do you know we still haven't a chance?"

The surveyor regarded Clint with startled eyes. "A chance?" He swore bitterly. "We've got about as much chance as a snowflake in hell and you know it!"

Clint grinned. "That's a matter of opinion, Tim," he said, and explained to the other what he proposed to do. For several moments after he had stopped talking there was silence in the tent. Dodd stared down at the map in front of him with narrowed calculation in his eyes. When he looked up, some of the gloom had vanished from his features. He said, "Maybe you're right, Clint. Maybe this will give us a chance to hit the line in time. I hope to God it does!" He paused, a new thought rising in his eyes. "But what about Bagley? I doubt whether he's going to like this little scheme."

Clint shrugged. "I can't help that. The major promised him we'd run the iron into his town and that's what we're doing! Nothing was said about *how* it would be done."

"Maybe so," Dodd pointed out. "But from what I hear about Bagley he's used to getting the best of the deal. They say he can be a plenty mean customer when he gets thick."

Clint smiled a little at the other's pessimism. "We'll worry about Bagley when the time comes."

Dodd and his helpers rode out of camp a day later. Two mule-drawn wagons loaded with necessary supplies, instruments and tents, accompanied them as they moved off, following the graded right-of-way toward the west.

Clint turned his attention to the job of pushing the rails westward at the greatly increased rate that was necessary. New men flocked into the camps, attracted by the opportunity of earning an unheard-of wage—two dollars and fifty cents a day. Breaking plows bit fiercely at the buffalo sod. Scrapers piled dirt into the fills. There was little machinery available, but brawny arms, wielding picks and shovels, formed the grade.

Yorke Adkins, who had been busy handling affairs from Pawnee City, joined Clint and took charge of the grading crew working west.

The iron thrust forward steadily, finally crossing into Dowell County. With the knowledge that two hundred thousand dollars in bonds had been added to the A. T. and W.'s treasury, Clint felt a little easier. Now Bagley's discovery of what the railroad's plans were couldn't make too much difference, he told himself.

Dodd finished his survey and reported back to Clint. "I've never come up against anything like Bagley City before," he told the younger man. "The place is a madhouse. Gamblers and saloonkeepers and land speculators are flocking in from Pawnee City fairly drooling from the mouth

in their eagerness to get their hands on some property. But sooner or later they all discover one sad fact. Bagley, himself, has managed to get his hands on all the available town lots. He's forcing the buyers to pay as high as three and four thousand dollars apiece. What's more, the news is going around that he'll only allow those saloons and gambling houses in who'll agree to give him a cut of their profits."

"Anybody ask you any questions?"

Dodd chuckled. "Not a soul. Nobody seemed to think it queer we should come into town from the north. I don't think they'll suspect what's up until the graders get to the new survey line."

CHAPTER TWO

Unknown Boundary

IT WAS another four days before the grading crew arrived at the new line laid out by Dodd. A day later Clint was conferring with one of his foremen when he saw a buggy moving swiftly across the prairie. Minutes later the team of grays was jerked to an abrupt halt. A bulky figure jumped to the ground and stalked forward.

"McLane, what the hell is the meanin' of this?" he called loudly.

"Howdy, Senator," Clint said meekly. "Just what are you referring to?"

"You know what I'm referrin' to!" the big man roared. "I've received reliable information that you have no intention of building through Bagley City at all! That what you plan is to run a spur south from the main line and that's all. You deny that?"

"Why no, Senator. Everything you say is quite true."

The angry flush that had suffused Bagley's fleshy features deepened. His tiny eyes were jerking with rage. "You admit it then?" he sputtered. "You and that mealy-mouthed, psalm-singing boss of yours lied to me! You gave me reason to believe the road would build through Bagley City!"

Clint said quietly, "Nothing of the sort. The major promised you we'd bring our iron to Bagley City. We intend to do so. He did not specify whether it would be main line or spur."

Bagley unloosed a string of oaths and glared. When he had finally regained a bit of his composure, he said, "All right, McLane. You and Halliday have come out on top this time. But I'd advise you not to celebrate your victory just yet! I may have a couple of cards to play in this game before it's over. Wait and see!"

He spun on his heel and marched back to the buggy. Big Mike O'Leary, foreman of the track-laying gang, stared after him curiously and scratched his head, a puzzled expression on his ruddy Irish face. "Now what the devil d'ye suppose he meant by that?"

Clint shrugged his wide shoulders. "I don't know, Mike. What's more, I don't intend to do any worrying about it. We got enough to worry about right here without looking for anything more."

Yet a seed of uneasiness had been planted in Clint's mind. At odd moments Bagley's words rose to the surface of his consciousness to annoy him. But most of the time he was too busy to let his mind speculate long on what had been behind the threat.

The rails were going down swiftly now, more swiftly even than Clint had hoped. The men seemed fired by the challenge of the task. They worked from dawn to dusk, seven days a week. Rain and sleet beat down upon them. The weather grew cold.

Day after day the heavy supply train pushed forward the cars, each loaded with a specific number of rails and exactly the number of chairs and spikes needed to lay them. Day after day the monotonous

commands rang out. "Up! Forward!" Twelve men would shoulder a rail and hustle it forward. "Ready! Down!" The rail would clang into place on the ties.

The spur into Bagley City was completed, and for a while saloons and dance-halls were thronged every evening. But some of the saloonkeepers and gambling-house men, frozen out of Bagley by high-priced lots and the senator's demand for a share of their profits, threw up crude structures at the junction of the spur and main line. Soon they were flourishing, and business in Bagley City's places of entertainment suffered. Quickly, the railroad men slapped the name North Bagley on the motley collection of saloons and stores along the main line.

THE deadline was still two weeks off when the grading gangs reached a sign marked KANSAS on one side, COLORADO on the other, a sign erected on the prairie at the end of the line of survey stakes. Tents and shacks went up and the name Stateline City was bestowed upon the location.

Clint realized that everything now depended upon the track-laying gang and the weather. But though snow fell, there wasn't enough of it to seriously impede the work.

Clint had a strange feeling of watching a miracle transpire before his eyes. On the twenty-second of December they were three miles from Stateline City. At four o'clock the following day, a pair of rails clanged down, maulmen hastily pounded down the spikes, and bedlam broke loose.

A locomotive whistle blasted loudly. Men threw down their tools and pounded one another on the back. They flung hats into the air. They shouted until their voices grew hoarse.

After the celebrating and handshaking and backslapping and handing about of whiskey bottles was over, Clint headed back through the opaque winter gloom towards his own tent. A grin of deep content indented the corners of his wide mouth and the thought of warm blankets and a good night's sleep loomed pleasantly in his mind.

Yet, from sheer habit, he forced his weary brain to go back over the events of the evening to make sure he had not neglected any of the things he had intended to do. He remembered scribbling out the message to Major Halliday and putting it into the telegrapher's hands. Also, he had announced to the men that the work train would be waiting in the morning to carry them back up the line in time to spend Christmas with their families or friends. Was there anything else? For a brief instant, the memory of Senator Bagley's threat popped into his mind. It was apparent now that the man had merely been bluffing.

Clint discarded his heavy coat, pulled off his boots and crawled under the rough woollen blankets on his cot. As he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep, he had a comforting conviction that even if the man had intended to act against the A. T. and W., it was now too late. . . .

TIM DODD rode the General Burnside into camp next day a little past noon. His first words were, as he stepped into the tent, "Where's Adkins? He still in camp?"

Something in the man's voice stirred a vague apprehension within McLane. "Adkins? So far as I know, he was on the work train when it went back up the track this morning. Most of the men were."

"You sure?"

Clint shook his head.

"Then I'll have a look in his tent."

"Hold on, Tim. Why're you in such a sweat to find Adkins?"

"I happened to be in the telegraph car at Bagley City when this came in over the wire." Dodd fished a flimsy from an inside pocket and handed it to Clint.

SENATOR BAGLEY:
BLUE CHIPS ALL YOURS. NO CHANCE OF MISDEAL. SEE YOU LATER.
MCLANE

Clint flung out an oath and raised startled eyes. "What the hell! I never sent this!"

Tim Dodd said, "I know it. That was the first thing I made sure of when I got here. I just finished a little session with Kelsey over at the telegraph car. At first he claimed he knew nothing about it and had never sent it. But after I threw a scare into him, he got his memory back and remembered that Adkins had given him the message. He said Adkins had given him money to forget he had ever sent it."

"This whole thing sounds crazy. Why would Adkins do that? What was the purpose behind it?"

"I'm not sure," said Dodd hesitantly. "But I got a kind of a notion. Looks to me like somebody was fixing it so's your name would become a stench in the nostrils of every honest railroader in the country."

Clint's eyes held a stunned look. "How'd you make that out?"

Dodd cleared his throat. "Well, say something should go wrong and the road should lose out on that government grant. What would that message look like then?"

Clint stared for a moment at the yellow paper in his hand. His face paled. "Why, in that case, it would look as though I'd sold out to Bagley."

"Exactly."

"But what could go wrong? We've fulfilled every condition Congress laid down. We've completed the tracks to the state line and we've accomplished that three days ahead of time. How is it possible for anything to beat us now?"

"That's the question that's been bothering me ever since I read that telegram. It seems to me that Adkins might be the one man in camp who knows the answer. If he sent that message, he must be working for Bagley. That means he must know what Bagley's got up his sleeve."

"Well then—come on! Let's find Adkins!"

The two men made their way between the rows of tents and crude shacks, Clint walking with long, angry strides, the smaller man hard put to it to keep up with him.

But Adkins wasn't in his tent. As they stood glumly outside, a man stepped through the opening of an adjoining tent, eyeing them curiously.

"Seen anything of Adkins?" Clint demanded.

The man nodded. "Sure. He and two other fellers were playing poker in his tent up until a few minutes ago. Then another feller come running up and they all ducked out and hustled off. They seemed to be in a hell of a hurry."

Clint said, "Maybe they ain't had time to get out of camp yet! Let's get goin', Tim!"

He broke into a run, sprinting toward the far end of camp where a long shed hastily assembled from scrap timber and canvas sheltered the camp's livestock from the biting Kansas wind. He could hear the little man scurrying closely at his heels, panting heavily.

Clint and the surveyor darted around the end of the shed and came suddenly on the four men. They were hastily saddling horses they had brought out from their stalls. Tim Dodd crowed wheezily, "There he is, Clint!"

Adkins had just finished tightening the cinch under his horse's belly when the sound of boots on the hard-frozen ground made him glance up. Clint thought he saw a flicker of fear cross his face as his eyes rested on the two men hurrying toward him. Hurriedly, he swung himself up into the saddle, drove in his spurs. His horse went off at a gallop.

HIS three companions made no effort to follow his example. They swung around and stood their ground, sullenly watching the two men come up.

Clint said angrily, "Where you men going? You get permission to take these mounts from the stables?"

One man said, "We didn't figger we needed permission. Adkins said it'd be all right."

"Where's Adkins going?"

The man shrugged his huge shoulders and a slow grin crawled across his flat-nosed, ugly features. "I don't know. He didn't say."

Clint said, "You men better stay here in camp until I get back. I got some questions to ask you."

He stepped over to the horse the big man had been saddling, gathered up the reins, made sure the saddle was secure, then prepared to swing up onto the animal's back.

At that moment Dodd gave a sudden warning shout. Clint turned swiftly but not in time to avoid the down-swinging gun barrel. It rapped him across the head and sent him to his knees. But because it had been a poorly-aimed, glancing blow it did not totally rob him of consciousness. He shook his head, seeking to pierce the blood-red haze that veiled his eyes. Dimly, he was aware that the ugly man with the broken nose was moving toward him again, the gun in his hand poised for a second blow.

The effort of rising brought icy moisture to Clint's brow, but he somehow staggered up onto his feet. In desperation he drove his right hand against the man's mashed nose, saw him lose his balance and tip backward, a startled look on his face.

A second man lunged at him from the side. A fist jarred his jaw and he half-stumbled over the fallen man and went down. Instinctively knowing what to expect, he tried to roll away from the swinging boot. But it slammed against the side of his head and Clint went limp. . . .

* * *

When blackness lifted from his brain, Clint found himself in his own tent, lying on his cot. Several friendly faces stared down at him. He saw Dodd bending over him anxiously. "How you feel, Clint?" the man inquired.

"Like hell!"

He put exploring fingers up to his head, and an involuntary groan broke from his lips. Slowly he dragged himself up on one elbow and stared at the little surveyor, tight-lipped.

"What happened? Our friends get safely away from camp?"

Dodd nodded. "They did. By the time help got there, they were a quarter of a mile across the prairie, riding hard. We found Millard, the stablekeeper, inside the shed. They'd slugged him to get the horses."

Clint frowned. "Well, that makes one thing clear. Adkins *is* playing Bagley's game, whatever it is."

"Yeah. But the hell of it is, we don't know any more about it now than we did. All we know is that Bagley is up to something and that it involves Adkins."

Clint had a sudden thought. "Notice anything queer about those fellows, Tim? About the way they did their fighting?"

Dodd stared blankly. He tenderly touched the swelling that lay along one side of his jaw. "All I noticed," he commented ruefully, "was they seemed to have especially hard knuckles."

"Didn't it seem to you there was something—well, almost professional—about the way they manhandled us? Like bouncers in a saloon, maybe?"

Dodd seemed to think this over. Then he nodded. "Now that you mention it, they didn't look much like railroad men. They wasn't Jerries and certainly they wasn't sorghum-lappers."

"Yet they must have been working in the camp because their faces seemed familiar. Adkins must have hired them to work with his grading gang. That means that whatever is scheduled to blow up in our faces has some connection with the grading construction. If only—"

Clint broke off suddenly. There was worry in his eyes. "Tim," he said, "have the boys saddle up a couple of horses. You and me are going for a little ride."

Tim Dodd eyed him sharply. "You think that's wise, Clint? Why don't you lay quiet for a while longer and rest? After all, you did get cracked pretty hard on the head back there."

"I'm all right," said the younger man. "Besides, I've got an idea this is no time to be resting quietly."

THEY headed the horses down to the tracks south of the tent city, then turned westward the short distance until they came to their end. While Tim Dodd stared at him in wonder, Clint got down and inspected the base of the sign marking the state line.

When he walked back to where Dodd waited and again swung back into his saddle, Dodd peered at him uncertainly. "Just what was the idea of that?" he wanted to know.

"I was looking for signs that the marker might have been moved recently."

"Moved!" Dodd was frowning, eyes puzzled. "I don't get it! Why the hell would anyone—" He broke off and stared at Clint. "Good Lord! You don't think—"

Clint shrugged and tried to conceal the fear that had clamped his heart. "I don't know. It's just an idea. I hope I'm wrong."

The two men swung their horses westward across the prairie, riding in silence. Their eyes darted anxiously ahead as they rode. After a while, Tim Dodd pulled up and pointed to a spot where the buffalo sod had been disturbed. "Looks like a survey stake could have been pulled from there and fresh dirt used to fill in the hole."

Moving on, they found additional, similar evidence. Finally, about four miles west of track's end, they reached a place where it was evident a square-cornered post had been dragged from the ground. Both men climbed from their saddles and stared down at the empty post hole.

"Good Lord!" Dodd groaned. "You were right! This is the spot where we set up the sign. Look—they were so sure nobody'd ever come out this far west of camp they didn't even bother to fill in the hole!"

Clint McLane stood silent for a brief moment. Then he said, "This doesn't give us much time, Tim. Midnight of the day after tomorrow. How soon can we get the men back at work?"

"Get the men back!" Dodd seemed astonished that the idea had even been suggested. "You realize what day tomorrow is?"

Clint gave the other man a blank look. "Tomorrow?"

"You forgotten tomorrow's Christmas?" Dodd's voice was querulous, almost angry.

Christmas! Clint had been so preoccupied with other matters that the holiday had slipped his mind! The plans he'd been making in the last few moments had already received a severe jolt.

Clint was well acquainted with the habits of construction men. He'd been one himself not long ago. He knew they took their Christmas celebrations seriously. The holiday gave them a taste of the warmth and good cheer and exhuberance that seldom came into their lives. It gave them a brief respite from the harsh struggle against weather and distance and weariness that was the railroad worker's lot. They were not likely to relinquish it easily. Still—

"Christmas or no Christmas," Clint said softly, "that track's going to get laid!"

As they rode back to camp, Clint roughly outlined what had to be done. Dodd nodded in agreement from time to time. But the bitter look in his eyes didn't change. Clint sensed that the man regarded the coming effort as an act of sheer desperation, doomed to failure.

Back at the misnamed Stateline City, Clint directed O'Flaherty to get steam up in the ancient General Burnside, then repaired to the telegraph car. Soon the brass was clicking out messages to Buffalo Springs and points farther east, even to Bagley City and to North Bagley. Work crews were to be assembled and shipped west as speedily as possible. Double wages were offered anyone who knew how to use a shovel. Triple wages for any track-layer willing to abandon his holiday festivities.

He sent Dodd back up the line to scrape up as many men as possible and hurry them into camp. Then he put every man in camp at work in an effort to extend the grade westward so that the track-laying could begin as soon as the men began arriving back at the end of the rails. In the make-shift grading crew were teamsters, maulmen, stable attendants, rail-buckers, payroll clerks and even a surveyor or two. They accepted their new assignments without complaint. Soon the prairie a short distance west of camp was a scene of frenzied activity.

In the middle of the afternoon, a train came up the track with a hundred and twenty workers. At dusk a second work train arrived, but only about fifty more men climbed down. Clint despatched an urgent message to Tim Dodd. A little later, Kesley, his face grim, gave him Dodd's reply:

Crew blowing lid off Bagley City. Senator dishing out free whiskey. What chance triple wages against that?

CLINT arrived at Bagley City at eight that evening. Tim Dodd was waiting when he jumped down. "It's no use, Clint," he said glumly. "You couldn't pry the men away from here with a crowbar. Most of them are in Handsome Jack's place and they won't even listen to any talk about leaving."

"We'll see about that!" Clint growled. "Handsome Jack's, you say?"

Jack's place in Bagley City looked much like his dancehall in Pawnee. The same large, ornate chandeliers hung from the lofty ceiling, the same oil paintings of fleshy nudes decorated the walls, and the same bald-headed piano-player seemed to be banging out the very same tune he had been playing when Clint had pushed through the doors back in Pawnee City. Only here the crowd was thicker, the babble of voices louder, the dancing more unrestrained.

As he paused, gazing around the room, Clint saw that about half of those present were railroad men. Even if he hadn't recognized their faces, he would have been able to pick them out by their high boots, flannel shirts, and the black handkerchiefs around their necks. Gamblers, townsmen, percentage girls and the riff-raff that always hung around such places accounted for the rest.

Clint made his way to the small raised platform at the end of the room where the piano stood. He tapped the bald-headed man on the shoulder. When he glanced around, Clint motioned for him to halt the music. But the man merely gave him a long, curious stare, his long, skinny fingers continuing to pound the keys.

Clint reached out a large hand, caught the piano-player by the scruff of his coat and hawled him backward off his stool. The tune he was playing broke off in a sharp discord as he clawed frantically to regain his balance.

Out on the floor, dancers halted and swung around. The murmur of voices in

the big room died away. Startled eyes shifted to the small platform at the end of the room.

Clint announced loudly, "I got something to say to you men who've worked in my gangs."

"Save your breath, McLane!" called a deep-voiced man. "We ain't workin' Christmas Day!"

A roar of approval went through the room. Clint had to raise his voice to make himself heard. "Men," he shouted, "I know how hard you've worked. If ever men earned the right to celebrate and blow off steam, you certainly deserve it—each and every one of you—"

"Well then," broke in a heckler, "why don't you get to hell out of here and leave us alone?"

Clint ignored the interruption, went on stubbornly. "But it's just because you have worked so hard that I'm asking you to climb aboard the work train that's waiting just outside town. The A. T. and W. is your road. You made it by the sweat of your brow and the labor of your hands. Now then—are you ready to stand by and see everything you built vanish in air just for the lack of four miles of track? I don't think you are! Besides, I'm willing to pay any man three times his regular wages to help me finish the job. How about it, men?"

There was an uneasy silence in the big room. Clint felt that some of the men were wavering in their determination to celebrate the holiday at all costs. But then a whiskey-thickened voice roared, "What in hell we want with money? The drinks around here are free!"

A stocky, red-necked Irishman stepped forward and spoke up. "Mr. McLane, sorr, ye an' the major have always trated me square an' daycent. What kind of man would Patrick Hoolihan be if he let ye down when ye needed him most? I'm fer seein' the job through! What about it, boys?"

JUST then Clint caught sight of Handsome Jack Devers. In the company of five or six hard-visaged men he was shouldering roughly through the crowd. There was an annoyed look on his lean, sharp-cut features.

"What's the big idea, McLane?" he called belligerently. "Can't you see the boys came out to have some fun, dance with my girls, have a good time? Anything wrong in that? They ain't in no mood to listen to fancy speeches! Ain't that right, boys?"

A part of the crowd set up a loud cheer. Handsome Jack grinned. He swung around to face his customers, held up his hands to restore quiet. "Ladies and gents," he announced. "Tonight Handsome Jack's belongs to you! Remember you are free to order anything you want at the bar. Everything's on the house—compliments of Handsome Jack!"

His words stirred an enthusiastic roar throughout the huge hall. A gravelly voice insisted, "Where's that damn piano-player? How about some music?"

"All right, Charley," Devers said to the bald-headed man. "You heard what they said. Start earnin' your salary."

The crowd broke up as the music resumed; some of the customers moved toward the bar, some took their places on the dance floor, while a third group headed back toward the gambling tables along one wall.

Devers turned and let his dark-eyed, openly amused gaze rest upon Clint's face. "You see, Mr. McLane, it ain't no use. You're wasting your time if you expect to get any of your workers away from here. They're having too good a time."

"He'll have one man at least!" growled an indignant voice near-by. Pat Hoolihan, hands on hips, was eyeing Devers and his men angrily.

"Come on, Clint." Tim Dodd put his hand on the bigger man's shoulder. "Devers is right. There's nothing we can do

now. Let's get to hell out of here."

"You better take your friend's advice," suggested the dancehall proprietor. "Otherwise, I might have to call upon my boys to throw you out. And I wouldn't like to do that, it being Christmas Eve and all."

Clint shifted his gaze to the half dozen men backing up Devers. He gave a little start of surprise as his eyes fell upon three familiar faces. They were the men who had assaulted Dodd and him at the camp that afternoon and helped Adkins make his escape. It was beginning to be clear that Bagley and Devers were working hand in hand.

Clint started to turn away. It was then the idea hit him. He wheeled suddenly, called loudly, "Devers, you cheap tinhorn! What makes you think I'll leave before I get damn good and ready?"

Anger darkened the dapper man's face. "All right, boys," he snarled. "Toss him out on his ear! He and any of his friends who get in the way!"

Half a dozen hard-faced men began to move purposefully in Clint's direction. However, before they reached him, two men had stepped forward to range themselves at his side—Tim Dodd and the stocky Irishman.

"Faith now," growled the track-layer, "an' I was jest waitin' fer an opportunity to push in some av thim ugly faces!"

He had his chance a moment later as Handsome Jack's men closed in. Fists swung in a wild melee, boots clumped heavily across the floor, pained outcries and curses filled the air. A percentage girl screamed—a shrill sound that rubbed rawly against the nerves.

CLINT nailed the first man to come into range with a wicked smash squarely on the jaw. He staggered backward and fell. But this gave two of his companions a chance to leap in with quick, battering blows. One man hit Clint in the stomach, sending a wave of sickening, numbing pain throughout his body. Before he had a chance to recover, the other man lifted a sledging fist against the side of Clint's jaw, spilling him back against the piano with a crash.

For a moment, Clint rocked unsteadily, the room spinning before his eyes. Then, with an effort, he focused his eyes on the faces of the two men moving in on him. Anger gripped him as he saw that one of the pair was the ugly man with the broken nose.

Before they could rush him, however, Clint saw that one of his construction crew, a lean-muscled rail-bucker, had dived forward out of the crowd. He grabbed Broken Nose by a shoulder, whirled him around and clipped him with an uppercut. The big man fell heavily.

His companion had followed this unexpected bit of action with open-mouthed amazement. Clint saw no reason why he should not take advantage of the man's momentary bewilderment. His first punch doubled the man up, his second stretched him on the floor beside his partner. Neither looked like they would get up for some time.

"Thanks, Nils," Clint panted.

"You bet, Mr. McLane. Ay tank ve skal have some real fun now!" He caught sight of another knot of struggling figures and hurried off eagerly.

Clint had a chance to catch his breath and look around. What he saw was highly gratifying. The fight had spread to the farthest corners of the dancehall and had assumed the proportions of a full-sized riot. White-aproned bartenders had swarmed out from behind the long bar. Gamblers in black frock coats had left their tables. But everywhere the railroad men surged forward to meet them, whooping joyously.

Clint grinned. Handsome Jack had erred seriously in attempting to have his strong arm crew fling the construction

boss and his two companions into the street. In that moment, the whole affair had resolved itself, so far as the A. T. and W. men present were concerned, into one simple fact. Three of their fellow workers were being assailed by a gang of saloon toughs and hired desperados. Gleefully, they had accepted the challenge.

A chair hurtled across the room, shattered the mirror back of the bar. Glass rained onto the floor. A man climbed over the bar and began flinging whiskey bottles with a somewhat erratic aim until a husky construction worker banged him over the head with a chair leg. . . .

An hour later, a hundred and fifty men were aboard the work train that pulled jerkily out of Bagley City. Behind them, they left the ruin of what had once been Happy Jack's dancehall, now merely a huge, bare-walled building, littered with broken glass, furniture and busted picture frames. It had been simple to enlist the services of the railroaders after that. They had come willingly, aware that little or none of Handsome Jack's bottled goods had escaped destruction and that the chance of further free drinks was extremely unlikely. Yet, they had come in high spirits, the flush of victory on their faces.

CHAPTER THREE

Onward, Westward—You Men of Steel!

CHRISTMAS Day dawned bright and sunny, although the wind held a penetrating chill. Clint, watching the work get under way, began to breathe easier. If no trouble occurred, the A. T. and W. stood an excellent chance of reaching the Colorado line in time.

But, at nine that morning, the blow fell. Tim Dodd and big Mike O'Leary, foreman of the track-laying gang, hurried up to McLane. One look at their faces and Clint experienced a leaden feeling in the pit of his stomach. "What now?" he asked.

"We're short on rails. We've got just about enough to lay a single mile of track."

Clint heaved a relieved sigh. "That all? Wire Buffalo Springs to send along the number of rail cars we need."

"I wish it was that simple," Dodd replied. "I did wire Buffalo Springs. They say those carloads of rails ain't there no longer."

"What!" Clint stared, slack-jawed. "Why—they've got to be there!"

"Buffalo Springs said orders came through from here to ship the rails back east. I guess you can figure out who signed those orders?"

"Adkins?"

Dodd nodded. "Adkins."

Gloomy silence settled upon the three men. A moment later, Clint asked, "How far east were they shipped and how long will it take to rush them back here?"

Dodd shook his head morosely. "You got to hand it to that Adkins. He didn't leave much to chance. Those cars wouldn't get here until late tomorrow—and that might as well be next year for all the good it'll do us."

Clint didn't say anything. It didn't seem as though there was much to say. A deadly weariness seemed to be pressing down on his brain, making it impossible for him to think. Well, what good was thinking now?

He needed three miles of rail that he didn't have. Three miles of rail there was no possibility of acquiring in time. Grimly the facts hemmed him in. The A. T. and W. would be forced into bankruptcy, and with it a dream would die. The man who had envisioned a link of steel extending west, bringing new prosperity and new settlers into this new country would find himself disgraced and scorned while others stepped in to reap the harvest he had sown.

"Well, Clint," said Tim Dodd finally,

"I hate to say this, but it looks like Bagley gets the last laugh. Shall I tell the men to quit work?"

Clint hesitated. "No," he decided. "Keep them at it as long as the rails hold out."

Clint was aware that Dodd was eyeing him queerly. The little surveyor gave his narrow shoulders an indifferent shrug. "Just as you say, Clint."

There was a streak of stubbornness in Clint McLane that even now refused to concede defeat. He turned and stared eastward at the long line of track stretching away into the distance. He thought of the money and effort and labor that had been invested in those shining strips of steel reflecting the pale, hard glare of the winter sun. And now, because of one man ——because of his greed and arrogance and vindictiveness—all this was to go for naught. Anger at the fat, soft-fingered man ran hotly through his veins. If it hadn't been for the spur line to Bagley City—

Clint McLane swung around suddenly and called out to Dodd and the foreman, who had started up the track toward the track-laying gang. Both men turned and hurried back to his side. . . .

AN HOUR later, leaving the track-laying in charge of Dodd and O'Leary, Clint McLane, with a picked crew of seventy-five men, rode back up the line behind a wheezy locomotive. They puffed and rattled past the crude buildings of North Bagley and proceeded south along the spur until they reached a point three miles north of Bagley City.

Here the locomotive halted, men climbed down. Soon the scene was transformed into one of strenuous activity. Half a mile of track had been torn up before the citizens of Bagley seemed to be aware of what was going on.

Then two horsemen rode out from town. One of them was Senator Bagley. He reined in his horse fifty yards from where Clint was standing and cast an angry, disbelieving glance at the toiling mob of railroaders along the track. Then he eased his huge body out of the saddle and strode toward the construction boss, breathing heavily. A dark scowl twisted his fleshy features. "McLane," he snapped, "what's goin' on here? What you think you're doing?"

"Nothing much, Senator. Just tearing up a few miles of track."

"Nothing much!" The senator's heavy features had turned a deep shade of crimson. "You think the citizens of Bagley will permit this interruption to their train service? We know our rights, sir! We demand you replace those rails at once!"

"I'm afraid that's out of the question, Senator."

Senator Bagley glowered fiercely. "Out of the question, is it? We'll see about that! I want to warn you, McLane—don't try our patience too greatly! You're likely to run into more trouble than you can handle!"

The arrogance of the man began getting under Clint's skin. Anger hardened his features. "Bagley," he said curtly, "you've done everything you possibly could to make trouble for us. You went to great lengths to see that the A.T. and W. would lose out on that government land grant. But for once, I think you've stacked the cards against yourself. We need these rails to reach the Colorado line and—God willing!—we'll have them!"

Bagley didn't linger long after that. He gave a little snort, spun around and started for his horse. Just before he rode off, he turned in the saddle and called out, "You ain't seen the last of me, McLane! I'll be back!"

Clint frowned. The threat behind the man's words was plain enough. When the senator returned, he would have a majority of Bagley City's able-bodied citizens with him. Clint estimated that Bagley

might be able to raise a force of several hundred men.

To oppose him, Clint had less than a hundred. To send to the end of the track for reinforcements would slow down the race for the state line. Yet reluctantly, Clint decided that this was the only course left him. He hurriedly scrawled a note to Dodd and despatched it with the engineer of the locomotive that puffed off a few minutes later, shoving several loaded rail cars before it.

But when it returned, after the trip to the end-of-track, only Dodd climbed down.

"You get my note?" Clint demanded angrily. "Where are the men I sent for?"

The other put up a heated argument. "You realize what the loss of another hundred men would do to us? It'd slow up the track-laying to a walk. O'Leary's got his crew putting down track like a gang of maniacs and making good progress. But he needs every man he's got."

"Maybe so," Clint pointed out to the little man. "But what happens when Bagley gets here with his army of townspeople? They'll chase us out of here and camp on the tracks to keep us from coming back. What then?"

Tim Dodd finally conceded the point. He climbed back aboard the locomotive after assuring Clint he would have the men he had asked for.

THIRTY minutes later, a red-headed man standing near Clint squinted down the track in the direction of Bagley City. Then he warned, "Looks like trouble's comin', Mr. McLane."

Clint looked, and for a few seconds his heart seemed to stop beating. Men were swarming along the tracks like a horde of maddened ants. It looked as though the entire town was coming. Most of them were afoot, although there were some men on horses and even a rig or two off on the edges of the mob.

As they drew nearer, Clint saw Handsome Jack and a number of his hirelings in the crowd. The realization dawned in Clint's mind that long before Dodd got back to the work camp and returned with help, the fight would be over.

Work had ceased and the railroaders began to arm themselves with crowbars, pick-helves or anything available. A familiar voice spoke at Clint's elbow. "Faith now, an' a shame 'tis to be fightin'

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on Christmas Day! But if they've a mind to start it, we'll do the finishin' of it!"

Clint looked around and discovered Patrick Hoolihan. Despite his avowed reluctance to do battle, the man's blue eyes were shining and a wide grin of anticipation wreathed his ruddy features. Remembering his fistic accomplishments of the evening previous, Clint drew comfort from his presence.

Clint waited until the resentful flood of humanity pouring down upon them was within hailing distance. Then he stepped out of the ranks of the construction workers and called out, "Hold on! I got something to say to you!"

An angry murmur went up from the mob, but they halted at a sign from Senator Bagley, who wheeled his horse forward.

There was a confident smile on his face. "You changed your mind, McLane? You ready to replace the rails you ripped up?"

Clint ignored the fat man, addressed the mass of townspeople behind him. "If you people go quietly back where you came from, I promise you one thing. The A. T. and W. will replace these tracks within a week's time. On the other hand—attempt to interfere with us now and this spur between the main line and Bagley will *never* be rebuilt!"

For a moment, his words brought silence. Then Senator Bagley shouted indignantly, "That's a damned lie! Men, don't let this two-faced railroad lawyer pull the wool over your eyes! Let him and his crew pull up these tracks and Bagley City is finished forever!"

A shout of agreement went up from several hundred throats and the crowd began to press forward once more. In a minute or two, the battle would be on. Clint saw that it could have only one outcome. The odds against the railroaders were too great. Besides he had glimpsed rifles in the hands of some of the mob. He knew that the saloon toughs from Handsome Jack's and the other entertainment places would be armed with derringers, sixguns and knives. His own men were unarmed. There was a limit to what you could ask a man to do, even though his loyalty was strong enough for him to accept it without question.

Clint swung around, defeat shadowing his face. "Boys—" he began.

A locomotive whistle blasted, echoing loudly across the prairie flatness, drowning out his words. His astonished gaze moved down the tracks. The General Burnside was coming up the track, smoke and glowing coals pouring blackly from her huge, bell-mouthed stack. As it began to slow, men began jumping from the cars and running along the track. Tim Dodd was among them. There was a pleased smile on his usually dour face as he came up.

"You wanted a hundred men," he said. "I brought you two hundred."

CLINT regarded the new arrivals with puzzled eyes. Many, he saw, carried rifles or clutched six-shooters. "These men ain't from the work camp. Where'd you get 'em?"

Dodd gave a soft chuckle. "You see before you practically the entire population of North Bagley. And they all hate Senator Bagley worse than the devil! These are the people that refused to pay his graft and wouldn't let him blackmail them out of half their profits."

"You mean they hate the senator bad enough to come out here and take a chance on getting their heads smashed in?"

Dodd said, "Well, it's this way. I sort of let it get around that if the citizens of North Bagley stuck with us, we'd stick by them. I said we intended to tear up the spur to Bagley and that would automatically make them the western terminus of the line. That is, if the citizens of the senator's town didn't prevent this from happening. They got the point in a hurry.

They're out here to keep anyone from interfering with taking up those rails. Every property-owner in North Bagley knows what this is likely to do to the price of his property and he don't intend to let the senator or anyone else stand in his way!"

The citizens of Bagley had come to an abrupt halt. The sight of the hurrying mob of reinforcements advancing to confront them seemed to have put a sudden damper on their lust for battle. The crowd eyed the guns in the hands of the new arrivals, the crowbars in the hands of the construction men. They made no forward move.

Senator Bagley rode his horse back and forth in front of his followers, haranguing them. But his words seemed to have little effect. One man called out, "All right, Senator. If you're so anxious to tangle with those railroad men, what's holdin' *you* back?"

A derisive laugh went up from some of Bagley's followers, and Clint saw the fat man's race redden. He swore violently and again urged the crowd to action.

However, a moment later, before the senator's horrified eyes, the mob started to break up and drift back in the direction of Bagley City. Ten minutes later, Clint had his gang back at work. The men from North Bagley hung around at the edges of the work scene, assuming the role of interested spectators. . . .

* * *

The twenty-sixth of December was a blustery day. Late in the afternoon, snow began sifting down out of the leaden skies. But by that time the track-layers could see the end in sight. They moved relentlessly ahead. At precisely 9:42 the men, working by the light of flares, spiked down the rails that invaded the virgin soil of Colorado.

Later, riding back up the line in the cab of the General Burnside, Tim Dodd asked, "You feel like celebrating tonight, Clint?"

Clint shook his head. Weariness seemed to be pressing down on the back of his neck like an actual weight. "I'd settle for a nice warm bed to crawl into. The way I feel right now, I think I could sleep for a week."

Tim Dodd nodded cheerfully. "I figured that might be the case. But still it isn't every day that the A. T. and W. crosses the Colorado line. So it seemed to me it wouldn't be quite decent to ignore the event entirely. We just got to celebrate a little."

The little surveyor had hawled a package from his pocket. It was wrapped in paper and tied with string and it gurgled faintly when he rolled it around in his hands.

Clint grinned. "This is a surprise, Tim. I didn't know that you were a drinking man."

"I'm not," said the little surveyor. "But after all, this is a special occasion, isn't it?" He unwrapped the bottle, uncorked it, and held it out to Clint. "Picked it up last time I went through North Bagley. Bartender I bought it from told me it was the best whiskey to be had in town," he added hopefully.

Clint raised the bottle, took one swallow, then hastily lowered it again. "You sure he said the *best* stuff that was to be had in town?"

Tim Dodd frowned. He sampled the bottle's contents, sputtered, gave a half-strangled cough. Then he stared at the bottle for a moment, made a grimace of disgust, tossed it out into the darkness beside the track. "Maybe the major has the right idea, after all," he remarked. "A man that don't drink don't get disappointed so often either. He sure as hell don't!"

THE END

(Continued from page 8)

ment he has is a brace and bit. So he replaces any tooth in your mouth for one dollar. That's why nearly everybody in our town has buck teeth.

* * *

If you like a good beat bend your ear to a new tune by JOHNNIE LEE WILLS AND HIS BOYS. It's called COYOTE BLUES and is recorded by BULLET. The boys really swing out with this tune and give it that potent blues beat and drive. The boys behind the vocal really make it effective. The other side is BOOGIE WOOGIE HIGHBALL which is a rocking beat instrumental.

* * *

Were you ever spanked when you were a kid? The reason I thought of it was because I was listening to one of those radio discussion programs and they were arguing about how a young-un should be punished. One side was for spanking and the other side was agin it. But I know if my Dad had been there which side he would have taken. In favor of spanking. I should know! Was I ever spanked? I've been spanked as far back as I can remember! But, I will say this...my Dad was always so polite about it. Before he gave me a spanking, he would always propose a toast. No kidding! He would say, "All right, bottoms up!" You know I never could get over that expression. Oh yes, another thing he used to say, which of course I could never agree with him was, "This is gonna hurt me more than it does you." How could it? I was the one on the receiving end! But, understand I'm not trying to take either side here on how a child should be punished. I sorta feel that it should be left to the individual.

* * *

You know, music sometimes gets under the skin just like an infection and when it sticks you just can't get rid of it no matter what. A tune like SHEEKS IN CORN AND A WRINKLE ON A HORN fits that category. It's done by STUART HAMBLEN for COLUMBIA RECORDS. It's a real hoedown production done by Stuart and his string band. I wonder if this tune will affect you like it did to me. Maybe I happened to be in a good mood when I heard it. Anyway, Butterball likes it! (You know who he is: he's the guy who slaps my records on my gramaphone in Mr. Mutual's studios in New York.)

* * *

I heard a new phrase coined by a veteran in New York. He was telling a news reporter that he was celebrating VM day. The reporter asked him what he meant, and he said Victory over Mother-in-law day. Seems that he had been living with his inlaws since he got married and finally had found a home of his own, so he was celebrating VM. You know that question of living with your wife's folks has always been a big problem. I did it when I first got hitched. I had to. I was in the Navy at the time and making the huge sum of $72.00 a month, so I had no choice. But it wasn't bad. They knew I was always broke, so they left me alone—and I stayed broke. But I think living with your inlaws is simply a matter of give and take—and if you were as broke as I was you'd take anything they'd give you! But it did make me happy to hear about this vet who was finally able to get into a place of his own. Cause I don't care what you say, there is no greater thrill than to be able to stand on your own two feet. Now if I can only get this other big foot of mine down on the ground, I'll be happy.

* * *

Dolph Hewitt, RCA VICTOR'S young folk singer, just had his second record released and it's called ASK MY HEART. It's a romantic ballad interpreted in the refreshing melodic naturalness of this young singer, who won his recording contract only a few months ago

as a result of his fine radio and personal appearances out of Chicago. His first recording I WISH I KNEW shattered all precedent by outselling all other first releases by any folk singer in history.

* * *

REPUBLIC PICTURES has just given Rex Allen his first starring role in a flicker called ARIZONA COWBOY which is a natural setting for this Arizona born singing cowboy. One of the songs featured in this picture is a tune called ARIZONA WALTZ, which he recorded for MERCURY records. It's a beautiful three-quarter melody with a western touch.

* * *

Remember a few months back when Kenny Roberts had a record out called I NEVER SEE MAGGIE ALONE and what a hit it was? Well he might have done it again with a concoction called CHOC'LATE ICE CREAM CONE for CORAL RECORDS.

* * *

I have a little historical information I would like to pass on to you. This is really a stickler. Did you know the safety pin is a hundred and one years old this year? Think of that, mother, a hundred and one years since the safety pin was invented! Gosh, there've sure been a lot of changes since then. But this is a changing world, isn't it? I know because I have a little baby doll of my own and I can speak from experience. But tell me, what did folks use before the safety pin was invented? Scotch tape? Thumb tacks? I dunno, but it's sure a wonderful age we're living in... And I have just written a song dedicated to the safety pin. It's titled: I'LL NEVER LET YOU DOWN.

* * *

I'd like to bring to your attention a little Gospel tune destined to become a hit. It may be the title that attracts the ear and also the theme behind it but anyway I want you to know about it. The song is JESUS HITS LIKE THE ATOM BOMB and it is recorded by two groups that I know of so far. One is the Sunshine Boys Quartet, DECCA RECORDS and the other is Red Pleasant (Southern Serenaders) for SELECTIVE. Both groups do a good job.

* * *

You know what the new fad is in New York? It's hand painted neckties. In one store, they got an artist who does nothing all day but paint ties to order. He'll paint anything on these ties: your social security number, a ranch brand, your dog's portrait, anything. I understand a lot of girls have their pictures painted on neckties to give to their boy friends. Well, girls, that's dangerous. The fellah gets up in the morning feeling groggy and the first thing he sees is you hanging from his tie rack. You look kinda wrinkled for a young girl and sort of frayed around the edges. But he figures he'd better wear the tie in case he runs into you, so he puts it on. It doesn't match his suit. In fact, you look awful at that time of the morning. He makes a face in the mirror and goes down for breakfast. Well, you dip in his coffee a little. Some of the paint comes off the tie. The coffee tastes funny. You look funny—no legs. By five o'clock your boy friend is fit to be tied, but the tie ain't. So he says to himself, "What do I want her hanging round my neck all the time for?" He rips off the tie and get's a new girl. So, girls, don't give him any ties with your picture on it if you want to tie down your man.

* * *

Well, it's been fun being with you this month, so until we can gather material for the next spasm of a fine educational feature, we'll just say so long, you all.

—Bob

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FRONTIER MONSTER

By L. C. Davis

WESTERN Missouri was still a wilderness in 1844. Panthers, bears, wildcats and turkeys were numerous and a settler told of seeing seventy-three deer in a leisurely two-hour stroll through the country. There were no railroads within a thousand miles. Steamboats were plying the Missouri river, but the Big Muddy was many miles away.

Matt Arnold was plowing his field a mile from the Osage River one warm spring morning that year when suddenly a terrifying shriek caused him to freeze in his tracks. It was like the scream of a dozen panthers. Matt's horse thought so, too, for it snorted and nearly jumped out of its traces.

He unhitched the animal with shaking hands and clambered aboard the quivering back. "Guess I'd best hit for the cabin," he reasoned.

Just then another shriek, louder and more terrible than the first, came from the direction of the turbulent Osage, and Matt decided he had better head for the settlement at Papinsville, instead. He started to dig his heels into the terrified animal, but that noble steed needed no urging. It tore out across country at racehorse speed. The fifteen miles melted away.

Matt's neighbors had heard the sound, too. Rifles were hauled down from resting places over doorways and knives and tomahawks seized with trembling hands and buckled on. Then they headed for Uncle John Whitley's cabin. Uncle John was regarded as the natural leader of the community by reason of his service under Andy Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans.

"Must be one of them prehistoric animals wandered over here from the Rockies," Uncle Jimmy Breckenridge opined, as he looked to his powder and priming, and other settlers called their dogs. Just then another scream pierced the air, but this time it was more human. It *was* human. Mattie, Uncle John's

daughter, was returning from the swollen river, where she had gone for a bucket of water. Her hair was streaming behind her. She had heard the monster, too.

"You git in that cabin an' stay there!" Uncle John thundered.

The men rode into the heavy timber and sent the dogs ahead. The canines returned shortly, and further attempts to make them take the trail proved unavailing.

By this time a plan of attack had been agreed upon. Six men with rifles were to form the first line of defense, while four armed with knives stood ready to back them up should the musket fire fail to annihilate the monster. They hunted until late afternoon when a storm broke and they were forced to seek shelter.

Just before they reached the cave, where they were to spend the night, the hounds suddenly came to life with a loud baying. The startled men froze in battle formation. Rifles were placed to shoulders, hammers eared back and eyes squinted down the long barrels. The dogs flushed their quarry, which proved to be a buck deer. It was promptly riddled with bullets by the trigger-happy frontiersmen.

Came the dawn. Came the shriek also, more terrifying than ever, followed by a tremendous roar that made the leaves on the trees quiver and the stalwart men quaver. With a supreme effort they fought off an urge to take a short cut home, and pushed resolutely toward the river's edge. The men took up positions behind trees, guns cocked and knives out.

The monster approached, shrieking ever louder, and now they could hear its labored breathing. The faces of the frontiersmen blanched as the dogs high-tailed it home with agonizing yelps. And then the "monster" hove into view around the bend. It was a steamboat!

Had the Osage not been at floodstage that year the *Flora Jones,* its decks crowded with gay passengers, would not have detoured and gone up the river as far as the old Harmony mission, where no one had ever heard a steam whistle before. And as if in mockery, that whistle shrieked again at the ten "tried and true" men who stared open-mouthed in silence, then shouldered their guns and marched silently back to the settlement.

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HE DIED LAUGHING!

By Dave Sands

BRADSHAW and McIntyre were business partners in Tombstone, Arizona, back in the 1880s, when the population of that silver mining town was fifteen thousand. The two men got along immensely until one day something happened to sever their business relationship—permanently.

It was all because of a shirt that Bradshaw purchased. It was "loud"—in fact, it was so flamboyant it shrieked.

He created a sensation in the hell-roaring town as he strutted like a peacock along Allen street—and looked like one. All who met him demanded, "Where did you get that shirt?"

Bradshaw was non-plussed. Were they really making fun of his shirt? The tumult grew, and so did his anger. Finally he stopped in his tracks and shook his fist at the growing crowd.

"I'll shoot the next hombre who opens his mouth!"

There was a hush, and a moment later a man pushed his way through the crowd to learn what the excitement was about. It was McIntyre, Bradshaw's partner. Evidently he arrived a little too late to hear the warning.

McIntyre roared with laughter, the others smiled or tittered behind the palms of their hands, while Bradshaw purpled. McIntyre held his sides. *"Where did you get that shirt?"*

Bradshaw's rage knew no bounds. He drew his sixgun and fired, the slug entering McIntyre's wide open mouth.

Well, anyway, Tombstone citizens reasoned, it was a rather nice way to die—holding one's sides with laughter!

HE'S AN EATIN', FIGHTIN' MAN!

(Continued from page 6)

He'd take a long string of boudins, contents and all, wrap 'em around a stick and roast 'em. Man, there was good eatin', accordin' to his lights.

The marrow they called "buff'lo butter" was another rich dish. When they could find a kettle or something to boil water in, they'd put about a pound or two of buffalo butter in water, add some thick buffalo blood, and boil it till it was thick as pea soup. After finishin' a meal like this, they'd likely have shiny grease all over their face, clothes, and anything else that happened to get in the way of their eatin'.

Of course buffalo wasn't the only food the trapper had. When he started out from a fort or supply center he'd usually have a load of staples with him such as salt, sugar, tobacco, coffee, and flour. But of course this didn't last long and pretty soon he was lookin' around for some game to bring down with his flintlock rifle.

Elk, deer, antelope, bear, beaver, and panther was all fair game. When they brought down one of the first three, they'd take the head—hair and all—and toss it in the fire. Then after a time they'd have a feed of roast brains.

But plentiful as game was, there was times when things got mighty tough. Lot of times in the winter there'd be snow up to the trapper's chin and all the game would have taken shelter. Weren't any tracks to follow or any sign to read then, and it was just luck if the mountain man stumbled into the den of a bear.

In these cases, anything that had meat on it was fair game. Snakes, rats, mice, birds, horses, mules, dogs, and berries—cooked or raw—was welcome food.

History even tells of cases where a stray Indian or two was roasted over a fire. In a fix without food, those trappers wasn't in any mood to talk morals—they was just plain hungry, and likely if an Indian hadn't happened along, they'd have made spare-ribs and rump-roast of each other. Which isn't unlikely, but the history books wouldn't tell about much of that.

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(Continued from page 51)

tionally at Custer, nor did any strike him.

"Now we had to go get Custer," Long Lance said. "He was fighting like big brave. But we must not kill him for Sitting Bull. We had to charge in and kill his chief companions any way we could—with knives, arrows, lances, and bullets—not many bullets, though; we were afraid we would hit Custer.

"We made believe we did not see him . . . Just as we finished all the killing and were going to make the peace sign to Custer . . . we saw him stand up and peer hard all over the battlefield . . . When he realized he alone was alive, he put his gun against his body and pulled the trigger."

That was Long Lance's story. Other Cheyenne and Sioux have at various times told similar stories, and though they are

not complete in every detail, they do have something of the truth about them. It must be remembered that many, many years passed before the Indians told their side, and memory fades with the years.

Taking Long Lance's account at its face value, we may assume that Custer thought he was being spared only for special tortures later, choosing death by his own hand rather than this prospect.

Leaving the tactics and strategy to the military logicians, this much seems certain: That if Cadet George Custer had believed the young chief, Sitting Bull, at West Point and taken his ceremony of the "blood brother" seriously, he would have survived Little Big Horn.

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Best tire value starts INSIDE...with

B.F. Goodrich

"RYTHM RIDE"... GIVES YOU MORE SAFETY, COMFORT, MILES

EMMETT KELLY

World's most famous circus clown, says:

"LOOK INSIDE FOR INSIDE PROOF"

"Under the Big Top the secret of top performance is teamwork," says Emmett Kelly. "And a look inside a B. F. Goodrich Silvertown shows that's true of tires as well."

Look inside a B. F. Goodrich tire yourself: Note how the cords are precision spaced in live rubber with no cross-threads! That's why they flex in rythm (*see below*) to give you the best tire value—"Rythm Ride!"

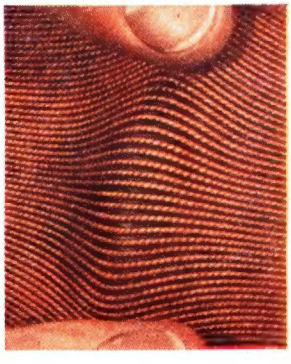
Yet "Rythm Ride" tires cost no more. See your B. F. Goodrich retailer for convenient terms and generous trade-in!

IF YOU CAN TELL WHICH CIRCUS RIDERS ARE BEST, YOU CAN TELL WHICH TIRE IS BEST:

1 **Every tire** has thousands of cords that flex as you ride. In most tires, these cords are hampered by *non-working* cross-threads. Result: They're *out of rythm* like the bareback rider and clowns above.

2 **B. F. Goodrich tire cords** have *no cross-threads* to hinder their action. They work *in rythm* like the circus stars above. Carry impact from one to another, smother road shock, reduce wear, cushion bumps.

3 **Most tire cords** are bunched and gapped by slender cross threads. Weak spots, "slacker cords", overworked cords result. BFG cords, instead, are sealed in live rubber, with uniform spacing and tension.



4 **Look inside—then decide.** Only B. F. Goodrich can give you "rythmic-flexing cords" in every tire for every need. See your BFG retailer. Buy now. The B. F. Goodrich Company, Akron, Ohio.